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TO COMMEMORATE THE 25th ANNIVERSARY OF THE
WILDERNESS ACT OF 1964

Senator Pete V. Domenici

February 28, 1989

Mr. PRESIDENT, I send to the desk a resolution to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

When Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which President Lyndon Johnson signed into law on September 3, 1964, the United States charted a course like that of no other in the history of nations. We permanently set aside for the American people areas of wild land where the forces of nature predominate and man is a visitor who does not remain.

Vast wilderness was our heritage from the time people first came to the shores of our country. A free and spirited nation was built in this new land. Establishing our great nation required that some of the wild places be settled and some of the wilderness bounty be used. Freedom to pursue private enterprise was one of the driving forces in our growth. Mining, ranching, timbering, farming, and related land developments contributed to our welfare, our economy, and our independence. Freedom to roam unhindered through wild, pristine stretches of land helped shape our character. Conflicts arose as the population and stature of our nation grew. From differing views our land ethic evolved. The creation of National Forests, National Parks, and National Wildlife Refuges was a first step as good stewards toward protecting our original inheritance.

Still, we had fewer wild areas as more land was settled and put to use to meet the needs of our nation. At the same time our land ethic continued to develop. In the past wild areas were often viewed as places to be feared and conquered. But, that has changed. Wilderness has been vital to our nation's success. As more wild areas disappeared, wilderness came to be viewed as a resource that must not be entirely consumed. Discussions focused on the need to retain some areas in a natural state.

A landmark demonstration of these discussions occurred in New Mexico. The Forest Service, acting on its own administrative discretion in 1924, designated the first wilderness in the United States--the Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico. This effort was pioneered by Aldo Leopold, who at the time worked for the Forest Service in New Mexico. Across the country other administrative designations followed.

Statutory protection for America's wilderness heritage came in 1964, with the passage of the Wilderness Act. Wilderness would be preserved. Wild, natural areas would always be there for future generations. The National Wilderness Preservation System, created by the Act, was endowed originally with 54 wilderness areas covering approximately 9 million acres in 13 states. Congress has since expanded the Wilderness System to 474 units covering more than 90.1 million acres in 44 states.

We need to commemorate our nation's accomplishment. Wilderness is a cultural heritage. Preserving it has been no small task. Decades of work by dedicated individuals, organizations, agencies, and Congress have been invested in balancing different viewpoints. Many people stand out in that effort; they all deserve credit. I have already mentioned Aldo Leopold. Being from New Mexico I want to mention another individual that means a lot to New Mexicans --Senator Clinton P. Anderson.

The late Senator Anderson, whom I was honored to succeed in the Senate, worked with others for many years in forging our nation's original wilderness legislation. He became acquainted with the idea of wilderness preservation in personal conversations with Aldo Leopold in the 1920s. On January 14, 1963, Senator Anderson introduced S. 4 in the 88th Congress. He chaired the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs to which the bill was referred. It was this bill that became the Wilderness Act of 1964.

We are proud of his contribution which meant so much to New Mexico and our nation. There are now 24 wilderness areas in New Mexico with the potential for many more. It has been my honor to be involved as a Senator in the creation of 18 of those areas.

The complexities of balancing differing viewpoints on public policy means that our work is not done. Wise use of natural resources is the only way we know of for the people of a nation to thrive and remain strong.

Theodore Roosevelt once made a statement that serves as a good reminder. He said, "No country can long endure if its foundations are not laid in deep material prosperity which comes from thrift, from business energy and enterprise, from hard unsparing effort in the fields of industrial activity; but neither was any nation ever yet truly great if it relied upon material prosperity alone." Certainly, multiple-use of our federal lands is vital. But, just as certainly we will protect our wilderness heritage.

Mr. PRESIDENT, in conclusion let me recall a quote by Senator Clinton Anderson. In 1961 he stated, "Like our museums and our art galleries, our wilderness areas may at any given time be visited by a relatively small percentage of people, yet they are available to any who will use them, part of our cultural resource as well as our natural heritage. We should regard them as such and cherish them."

This year we will continue to work together on wilderness questions. I encourage us to do something else this year. Let's take time to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. To this end I am introducing a joint resolution. Several of my colleagues have already cosponsored the resolution. I urge the rest of my colleagues to join me by doing the same.
