

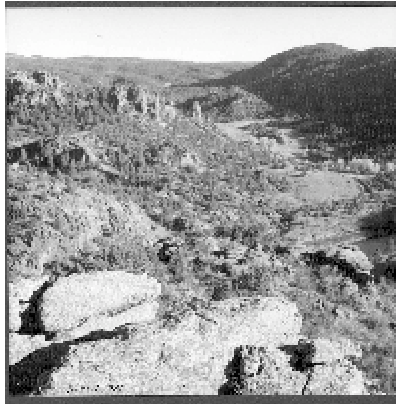
Congressman eyes wilderness plan

Joel Hefley pledges to protect Brown's Canyon

by Dan Wilcock

If Congressman Joel Hefley gets his way, thousands of acres of stunning canyon land, meadows and mixed forest in Chaffee County will be marked off limits to motorized vehicles and timber harvesting.

Hefley, a Colorado Springs Republican, recently notified his constituents via his Web site of plans to introduce a bill to create the Brown's Canyon wilderness area. The news of Hefley's plan has delighted environmental activists.



The rugged rocks of Brown's Canyon near Railroad Gulch, approximately 75 miles west of Colorado Springs.

"It will be a good indication and a good test," said Colorado Springs environmental activist John Stansfield, "[of] whether we can get other wilderness bills passed in [District 5] with Rep. Hefley as the prime mover."

Brown's Canyon's pink granite walls gradually swell upward over a stretch of the Arkansas River between Buena Vista and Salida, approximately 75 miles west of Colorado Springs. Up and over the walls, piñon juniper trees give way to ponderosa pine forests, open meadows and aspen groves on a tributary's headwaters above 10,000 feet. The stretch is known for its beauty and the river's heavy traffic in whitewater rafting.

Hefley's proposed bill would make a 7,3000-acre wilderness area off limits to vehicles, mining or harvesting, as well as an adjacent 2,879 acres of "protection area" at Railroad Gulch. Vehicles would be allowed on pre-existing roads in the protection area, but timber harvesting would be limited to Forest Service "forest health improvement" management.

"It would be great," said Hank Bevington, general manager of American Adventure Expeditions, an outfitter that runs rafts down the Arkansas. "Not even so much for our business," he said, referring to customers who come from around the country for the scenery, "for the good of the state and our environment."

Hefley's spokeswoman declined to comment on the congressman's reasons for pushing the wilderness area. Hefley, received 70 percent of the vote, winning his 10th term in office, is known more for his commitment to military affairs; however, with regard to Brown's Canyon, his Web site cites "stunning scenery" and the chance for "recreation and solitude."

If the area were declared a wilderness, recreation would be restricted to the primitive kind -- backcountry hiking and camping and not motorized vehicles.

"It could be great," said Brian Hawthorne, public lands director for the off-road advocacy group the BlueRibbon Coalition. But, Hawthorne said, "We'd like to see wilderness bills get a full vetting" from all members of the community, including off-road users.

-- *Dan Wilcock*