

Ending La Luz run safeguards wilderness

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Race can find a different route or venue that respects our lands

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The recent decision by Forest Service District Ranger Crystal Powell to deny the permit to run the La Luz Trail Run race through the Sandia Mountain Wilderness may be understandably unpopular with some runners and race organizers (“La Luz race hits end of trail as Forest Service denies permit,” *Albuquerque Journal*, May 15). But this decision is the proper one to protect the wilderness character of this iconic area.

Wilderness is the most protective land designation in the United States. My organization, Wilderness Watch, works to safeguard Wildernesses around the country. We often challenge Forest Service decisions and occasionally take the agency to court when it violates the 1964 Wilderness Act. But in the case of the La Luz race permit, the Forest Service has made the right decision in accordance with the Wilderness Act and agency policies, and there are good reasons for runners and others to support this decision.

Wildernesses contain a huge array of values, many of them intangible like protecting opportunities for solitude, and some of them more tangible like protecting wildlife and increasingly scarce habitat. These values go far deeper than physical impacts to trails or whether litter is left behind. Wildernesses are emblematic of our human recognition of their inherent wildness, and symbolic of our society’s need for restraint and humility in dealing with them. By designating an area as wilderness, we recognize that area’s right to function on its own, without the active management and manipulation used on other federal lands and without the types of intensive intru-

sions prominent there.

Commercial activities and competitive races degrade a wilderness’s wild character. They detract from an area’s wildness and make an area more like the lands overrun by civilization, rather than “in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape,” as the Wilderness Act states. That’s why the framers of the Wilderness Act and Congress included a prohibition on commercial activities in designated wildernesses, with only a very narrow exception for some outfitting and guiding activities. The Forest Service’s wilderness regulations also contain prohibitions on commercial activities and competitive events.

I sympathize with organizers of the trail run, particularly when the race has occurred since before Congress designated the Sandia Mountain Wilderness. But all across the country are examples of activities once allowed in areas that have needed to end after an area was designated as wilderness, all to better protect the wild character of these special lands for future generations and for wildlife, which are continually squeezed into smaller and smaller pockets of secure habitat. In Minnesota’s Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW), for example, the 1978 BWCAW Act ended many activities, including a competitive international canoe race, to better protect the area.

Other options likely exist for the race. A few years back, the organizers of a winter sled dog race wanted to route its race through a portion of the BWCAW. The Forest Service appropriately rejected that proposed route, and the race organizers eventually selected a different route. That outcome — finding another venue or route outside of designated wilderness — may also well work for La Luz Trail Run. ... a far better outcome than weakening protections for the Sandia Mountain Wilderness.