



Friends of Otero Press Release - For Immediate Release: April 8, 2004

CONGRESSWOMAN HEATHER WILSON HIKES WITH FRIENDS OF OTERO (FOO)

New Mexico Congresswoman Heather Wilson today joined Friends of Otero (FOO) to hike a significant portion of threatened trails located in the Otero Canyon area. Of the nearly 50 miles of trails located at Otero Canyon, approximately 21 miles of the trails have been identified for closure by Kirtland Air Force Base (KAFB). These threatened trails are located on land owned by the Cibola National Forest (NF), but leased to KAFB as part of a land withdrawal originally used to support the efforts of World War II.

The hike, which lasted approximately four hours and covered 8.5 miles, was followed by a press conference at the Otero Canyon main parking lot located on South 14, near Tijeras, NM.

Congresswoman Wilson initiated the tour conducted solely with her staff and FOO immediately after KAFB released their final Environmental Assessment (EA) on March 22nd, 2004. This controversial EA included a new proposal by KAFB that was not sent out for public comment in the draft EA released in spring 2003, and will make available only 7 additional miles of trail than previous proposals by KAFB. Currently the public has until April 23, 2004 (30 day comment period) to send their comments in to KAFB regarding their proposal, and FOO has been actively working to push that date back to July 1, 2004 (roughly a 90 day comment period). KAFB took nearly 9-months to respond to the public's comments after the draft EA.

After completing the hike, Wilson expressed confidence that a further compromise can be offered by KAFB.

"I picked a great time to hike the Otero Trails," said a muddied Wilson after her hike. "After days of rain, a soggy trail can be a challenge. I can see how much fun it is to hike or bike here, so I fully understand why people are so passionate about preserving access to this beautiful part of the Manzanos."

In addition, Congresswoman Wilson further stated in the April 8, 2004 Mountain View Journal, *"It strikes me that the line of that fence, whether it's 50 feet one way or another way, will really impact that trail system. I just want the base to work with users of the area to preserve as much as they can while still securing the base."*

Wilson also identified some features on the west ridge that may allow for a compromise, when she stated, *"The ridge is actually pretty wide and flat, and there is the option to move the fence and preserve trails."*

In addition to the loss of trails at the Otero Canyon area, the new fence line will effectively close off access to nearly 5000 acres of current Cibola NF land. Access to this area would be nearly





impossible because of bordering by private property and steep canyon walls. This land is located north of the withdrawal area and also is bounded by I-40, Four Hills, and the Rio Grande Cement plant. *"If they run the fence as they currently plan to, that would be closed off from the East Mountain side,"* Wilson said in the Mountain View Journal. *"It might be possible as well for the base to allow people to get in there. It's public land, and that also may be a way to help accommodate both recreational use and base needs."*

Congresswoman Wilson also heard the comments of many residents, including the calls from FOO to extend the public comment period for this final EA. Wilson also stated in the Mountain View Journal, *"I certainly have some suggestions for them and hope to work on them,"* she said. *"I also will ask that the comment period (on the new plan) be extended, it's only 30 days now."*

Congresswoman Wilson was the first of New Mexico's congressional delegation to become involved in the Otero Canyon issue. Due to her efforts, she was able to negotiate a public hearing for the draft EA, and also extended that public comment period. An Air Force Academy graduate, and also Oxford educated, Wilson serves on the House Armed Services Committee where she has consistently worked to keep KAFB strong before the next Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRACC) starts its work. New Mexico has enjoyed the benefits of Wilson's intervention as she worked to preserve New Mexico's natural beauty, most notably through the federal purchase of the Baca Ranch in northern New Mexico and the Tres-Pistolas nature area in the East Mountains. FOO is truly appreciative of her efforts in the Otero Canyon cause.

In addition to working with Congresswoman Wilson, FOO has worked to involve Governor Bill Richardson, Senator Jeff Bingaman, Congressman Tom Udall, Albuquerque Mayor Martin Chavez, the Albuquerque City Council, the Bernalillo County Commission, the City of Albuquerque Open Space Division, in addition to the Village of Tijeras and Mayor Gloria Chavez.

FOO is a not-for-profit, advocacy group formed in May 2003 to coordinate efforts to help protect the Otero Canyon multi-use recreational area located south of Tijeras, NM. Members of FOO consist of local volunteers, and subscribers to their on-line petition and forum located at www.saveotero.org, founded by Scott Gunn, of Albuquerque, NM. While the group represents multi-use activities on the trails such as hiking, birding, trail running, and motorcycling, Friends of Otero are affiliated with FooMTB, Central New Mexico's representative mountain biking group (www.fooriders.org).

For more information please visit www.fooriders.org/otero.





Congresswoman Heather Wilson, along with Jennifer Turgeon and John Red-Horse, studies a map of the proposed fence-line
Photo: Brian Cherry



Congresswoman Heather Wilson takes a break during the 8.5 mile hike.
Photo: Jennifer Turgeon

