

STATE GIVES GILA REGION “ECOTOURISM” BOOST

by Richard Mahler, Newsletter Editor

“We’re now on the radar,” declares Catherine Wanek, a member of a state tourism board representing the southwestern corner of New Mexico. “In the past, our area has been pretty much overlooked [by state tourism officials].” Kingston-based Wanek, co-owner of the Black Range Lodge, is excited about May’s designation of “the Gila Wilderness and surrounding areas” as one of two “fast-track pilot projects” in a government-sponsored ecotourism development program.

“Ecotourism has the potential to make our state an even more enthralling destination for travelers from around the world,” said Tourism Secretary Michael Cerletti, in announcing an initiative that promises to build on existing marketing efforts by his office. Cerletti’s office said the Gila and Taos areas were chosen because of their demonstrated ability to work for the conservation of wilderness and preservation of indigenous cultures while remaining true to the spirit of adventure-based ecotourism.

“Changes aren’t going to happen overnight,” cautions Wanek, “but I’m hopeful that this will really benefit our cities and small towns as well as our rural areas. Our local urban centers will provide services such as restaurants, stores, and lodging for visitors heading for the outdoors.” She foresees an enlightened kind of tourism that not only celebrates our natural beauty and resources, but simultaneously protects them. “Our challenge,” says Wanek, “is to find a way, as visitation increases, to earmark a piece of the tourism dollars to support conservation efforts.” Because increased visitation has inevitable impacts, she is urging that a mechanism be introduced to direct some of the increased revenue into resource protection and conservation.

Tourism is one of New Mexico’s biggest revenue sources and industry insiders report an often-stated desire among travelers here to have an “authentic” rather than a “canned” experience. In society as a whole, according to media reports, there is increased interest in getting in touch with nature directly, particularly among city-dwellers and suburbanites.

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oversight and enforcement on the part of industry can have devastating consequences. At the federal level, the oil and gas industry is exempt from compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act. In New Mexico, the PIT rule is under potential threat of rollback given oil and gas industry complaints, thus putting our valuable groundwater resources at risk. Here in Grant County, strong environmental regulations and vigilant enforcement are needed to ensure that Freeport-McMoRan operates its copper mines responsibly to prevent major spills that threaten our surface and groundwater quality. Every legislative session, industry attempts to roll back a variety of environmental regulations. You can stay tuned for action alerts from GRIP (sign up for our e-mail list at www.gilaresources.info) and its partner in the Environmental Alliance of New Mexico, Conservation Voters New Mexico (www.cvnm.org). Together, EANM members defend our existing environmental laws from industry legislative attacks and promote pro-environment legislation in the Round House.

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Inflatable kayaks navigate the Gila River. (Donna Wells photo)

“With over three million acres of wild natural beauty [in the Gila],” notes Wanek, “we are in a great position to help these kinds of people reconnect, both with nature and — through nature — with themselves.”

The first goals of the local ecotourism initiative include launching a new website, www.gilahighcounty.com, and disseminating information on Earth-friendly or backcountry lodging and outfitting services. For further information, contact Catherine Wanek at 575 895-5652 or cat@blackrangelodge.com.