

PUBLIC LANDS:

Obama admin backs wilderness bill, cites concerns with streamlined grazing

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The Obama administration yesterday said it generally approves of a bill to convey lands in western Nevada to support a copper mine in exchange for the designation of 48,000 acres of wilderness but said it still has concerns with a bill to streamline the permitting of grazing on public lands.

An Interior Department official also opposed a proposal to slightly reduce the length of federal wild and scenic protections along California's Merced River to allow more water storage.

Yesterday's hearing before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation was the first this Congress to consider new wilderness after the 112th Congress became the first since the 1960s not to designate any new wilderness.

Freshman Rep. Steven Horsford (D-Nev.) said H.R. 696 would both convey 12,500 acres to the city of Yerington to support development of Nevada Copper's Pumpkin Hollow project and prohibit mining, road building and other developments in the Wovoka Wilderness, an area used by hunters, hikers and explorers for more than 150 years.

The bill carries Republican support from Nevada Reps. Mark Amodei and Joe Heck and is sponsored in the Senate by Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Sen. Dean Heller (R-Nev.).

"It's a ground-up effort that is worthy of this Congress' approval," Horsford said.

George Dini, mayor of Yerington, said the proposal is supported by the Nevada governor, the superintendent of schools, the state's Legislature and Yerington's City Council. He said the mine's development would provide long-term, high-paying jobs for his region, which is wracked by high unemployment.

The federal lands would be purchased at fair market value and would be used mostly for infrastructure to support the mine.

"This land sale represents the economic future of the city of Yerington and Lyon County," Dini said.

Ned Farquhar, Interior's deputy assistant secretary for land and minerals management, said the bill's 180-day timeline for completing National Environmental Policy Act and National Historic

Preservation Act reviews and land appraisals would be tight, but that overall, "we think this is a good bill."

Leslie Weldon, deputy chief of the Forest Service, said the bill's Wovoka Wilderness rules would protect the "largest remaining tract of wild country in Lyon County" and would preserve sage grouse habitat, prehistoric sites and primitive recreation opportunities. She said the agency has concerns over provisions involving wilderness boundaries, water rights and wildlife management, including the state's use of helicopters in the wilderness area.

The bill was backed yesterday by the Wilderness Society, which said the Pine Grove Hills areas slated for protections contain an array of Great Basin habitats and offer impressive recreational opportunities.

"Finally, the subcommittee heard its first wilderness bill of the 113th Congress," said Paul Spitler, director of wilderness campaigns at TWS. "This is a balanced bill that the committee should approve immediately. It has been 1,480 days since Congress last protected an acre of wilderness, and the House Natural Resources Committee failed to advance a single wilderness bill in the 112th Congress."

In the House, passage of conservation bills will in large part depend on whether they are paired with economic development proposals such as Horsford's bill's language conveying lands for Nevada Copper. But it remains to be seen whether the House and Senate can agree on a public lands package amenable to both parties and the environmental and development stakeholders they serve.

The Senate companion to Horsford's bill, S. 159, will be heard by the Energy and Natural Resources Committee next Thursday.

Grazing bill concerns

Members also discussed H.R. 657 by Rep. Raúl Labrador (R-Idaho), which seeks to provide regulatory certainty to ranchers who graze livestock on Forest Service and BLM lands.

The bill, which is strongly endorsed by the Public Lands Council and National Cattlemen's Beef Association, would extend grazing permits issued by BLM and the Forest Service from 10 years to 20 years and codify appropriations language that allows grazing under expired permits to continue until an environmental review can be completed.

It would also require certain grazing permits to be reissued under categorical exclusions that limit review and public comment under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Obama administration said it could support having the option of issuing 20-year permits but that the bill limits agencies' ability to provide for appropriate environmental reviews.

"The [Interior] Department cannot support it because of the overarching impact the bill could have on the 155 million acres of public lands used for livestock grazing, potentially affecting other valid uses and the health of the land itself," Farquhar said.

Farquhar said the administration also opposes H.R. 934 by Reps. Tom McClintock (R-Calif.) and Jim Costa (D-Calif.), which would adjust the Merced Wild and Scenic River boundary to allow the Merced Irrigation District to apply for federal approval to raise a spillway at Lake McClure.

The measure would allow storage of an additional 70,000 acre-feet of water annually in a wet year, the sponsors said.

While the bill would reduce federal protections by about 1,800 feet, Farquhar said the proposal deserves more review by the public.

McClintock said the bill would simply correct an encroachment that the wild and scenic designation made on a previous Federal Energy Regulatory Commission boundary and that lawmakers would be hesitant to designate new wild and scenic river boundaries if they knew how difficult it would be to amend them.

Critics of the bill say it would set a bad precedent.

"The reasons given for nibbling away at the wild and scenic area can, at some point now or in the future, be made for every protected river as nearby population rises and water and power needs increase," said Dan Sealy, a board member with the Northcoast Environmental Center.

[FOR notes: Rep. McClintock did emphasize the FERC project boundary consistency "correction" at the hearing. However, there is no inconsistency encroachment to correct. Federal agencies recommended and Congress designated the wild & scenic river boundaries fully aware of the Commission's project boundaries.. One is a FERC administrative boundary customarily drawn above project reservoirs (thus, across rivers); the other is to define a free-flowing river. They are not the same, do not serve the same purpose, and do not conflict.]