
Rural Nevadans question size and timetable for wilderness proposal



BY BY [KURT HILDEBRAND](#),

A proposal that more than a half million acres of land in Western Nevada will be declared wilderness has residents organizing to head off the yet-to-be written Lyon and Mineral counties lands bill.

Wellington resident Phil Tucker said the area proposed for wilderness ranges from the Pine Nut Mountains south across Wilson Canyon, down to the Sweetwaters and Mount Grant.

"This thing is just enormous," Tucker said. "And they're going outside of the U.S. Forest Service's usual protocol."

Tucker said there are areas the forest service has studied for a number of years.

"They basically studied the Sweetwater Mountains up to Wilson Canyon," he said. "Their proposal is nowhere near as extensive as what the Wilderness Project is proposing. The forest service is not even ready for a public examination."

Bridgeport District Ranger Cheryl Probert said her office is looking at three areas for wilderness in Lyon and Mineral counties, but the expansion is the result of lobbying by private groups.

"Several wilderness groups put together a proposal for wilderness as part of the Lyon and Mineral counties lands bill," she said. "As far as the forest service is concerned there is no recommended or proposed wilderness in Lyon or Mineral counties. That particular proposal is an effort by private, non-government organizations."

Probert said forest service inventories of roadless areas identified three areas that could meet wilderness characteristics, but they have not gotten to the next step of involving the public.

The three areas are 68,914 acres in the Excelsiors in Mineral County, 80,000 acres in Pine Grove South and about 5,000 acres in the Three Sisters portion of the Sweetwaters for a total of about 154,000 acres.

Probert agreed with Tucker that the latest wilderness proposal is outside the regular forest service process.

Wilderness Project Northern Nevada Outreach Director Cameron Johnson said the group's proposal is for 692,889 acres in Lyon and Mineral counties, with two areas along the northern Douglas County line.

"Our inventory shows there are areas outside the roadless boundaries being discussed by the forest service that we think should be included," he said.

Johnson said trying to complete the Mineral and Lyon lands bill by the end of 2008 is a timetable set by the congressional delegation.

"That's the time line that the delegation has made known to all the stake holders," he said. "Thus far, we're doing our best to answer questions in that timeline, but it's not our timeline, it's the delegation's. This is a draft proposal, the delegation is just working to bring everyone to the table, find out what everyone wants, needs, doesn't want,

doesn't need."

The Wilderness Project's proposal includes 195,638 acres in Lyon County and 497,251 acres in Mineral County.

"Not even other federal agencies have been brought into this," Tucker said. "This is basically an end run. It is so utterly beyond the scope of how you designate wilderness and what is proposed doesn't even resemble what we have examined."

Tucker said a second phase involves 800,000 acres stretching from Bishop southeast into Nevada.

Johnson confirmed the project is looking at a proposal for wilderness in Esmeralda County, but that they haven't completed their surveys yet.

Tucker said about 500 people attended a meeting with representatives of Rep. Dean Heller, R-Nev., Sen. John Ensign, R- Nev., and Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., at Smith Valley High School on March 5.

Tucker said one of the difficulties tracking the Lyon and Mineral counties land bill is that the legislation has yet to be written.

"We're sure it's going to come out of the Senate," he said. "We have got to get the commissioners to go to the governor and tell him we don't want this. I think people in Douglas County will oppose it too when they begin to realize this thing has an ugly aspect for them, too."

Motorized traffic would be forbidden on areas of the wilderness that didn't already have established roads, something Tucker said would affect the economies in rural Western Nevada.

"We're looking at things like job hemorrhage and loss of tax base," he said. "It's amazing at how many recreational businesses there are in northwestern Nevada. I didn't know it until I started pounding the pavement."

Tucker said he counted more than 100 businesses that employ more than 900 people dependent on recreation.

Reid and Ensign issued a joint press release saying that there will be additional public meetings with local stakeholders that include ranchers, farmers, tribal leaders, outdoor enthusiasts, and local elected officials to ensure every voice is heard and all needs are addressed in future land bills.

Should the bill be approved, Johnson said existing grazing permits and patented mining claims would continue.

"Camping, picnicking, horseback riding, hunting and fishing are all guaranteed and allowed to continue," he said. "Certain routes are left open so motorized access can continue so that if someone has a horse trailer they can set off on a ride or a hunter who bags a mule deer and can get it to the road can get it out."

However, motorized vehicles riding across country would not be allowed.

"While that's specifically spelled out in our proposal," he said, "the agencies are working on their own mandates to curb use of motorized traffic."

Johnson said work on the lands bill is just beginning.

"Nothing here is etched in stone, including the maps," he said. "We are still trying to get out and answer questions people may have and address specific concerns. Maybe sometimes on a philosophical level people don't agree with us, but if we continue to focus on specific areas of concern, we can find areas of compromise."

