

Oh, no. Not ... wilderness!

In some rural Nevada counties, saying the dreaded "w" word drives people, well, wild

by ANDREW KIRALY

SOUTHERN LYON COUNTY is home to rolling hills, riparian meadows and 9,400-foot Wovoka, an alpine mountain that hosts ancient petroglyphs and archeological sites. Black bears roam the surrounding Pine Grove Hills.

But it's not wilderness.

To the west are the Sweetwater Mountains, home to East Sister Peak, where an intrepid hiker who scales the 10,400-foot mountain is rewarded with amazing views of the Sierra Nevada.

But that's not wilderness either.

Not according to the Lyon County Board of Commissioners, which unanimously passed a resolution March 20 that rejected designating anything in its county as wilderness. Neighbor Mineral County did the same a few weeks earlier. Esmeralda County followed suit. Wilderness shmilderness, county officials say.

"We just decided enough is enough," says Lyon County Commissioner Phyllis Hunewill. "You just can't work with these people."

YOU KNOW, THESE PEOPLE

"These people" she's referring to are activists with the Nevada Wilderness Project and Friends of Nevada Wilderness, groups that were hoping to get chunks of Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties designated as wilderness as part of a federal lands bill that, only a few months ago, had prospects of being passed this year. That was until miscommunication, paranoia and fear took over, and sent the three counties into a veritable revolt against what they saw as eco-intruders scheming to steal their land with the help of the federal government.

The case of the Great Lyon-Mineral-Esmeralda County Wilderness Freak Out is instructive to consider from the vantage point of Las Vegas. Here in Southern Nevada, the foes of wilderness are usually developers and casinos. Beyond the booming valley and well into the rurals, however, it's mining and livestock interests -- mixed in with a hefty dose of anti-government sentiment.

"I'll be honest and say a lot of it is that the public doesn't trust the wilderness people or the congressional delegation where a land bill is concerned," says Jim Sanford. The longtime resident of Yerington (in Lyon County) and former publisher of the Mason Valley News spoke against creating wilderness.

"This process was just odd in that so much fear and misinformation got out, and the amount of emotion was surprising," says Shaaron Netherton, executive director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness. "We've been [working on federal land bills] for eight years in other counties, and this just kind of surprised us."

The end result of this culture clash between cowtown residents and conservationists: A dead lands bill that could have both helped rural economies and preserved sensitive land -- and a congressional delegation left scratching its head.

AND THEY'RE SURPRISED?

Since the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act of 1998, Nevada's congressional delegation has more or less been hopping from county to county, passing customized lands bills that are a sort of grab-bag for every interest: Some



COURTESY KURT KUZNICKI, FRIENDS OF NEVADA WILDERNESS
Proposed Wovoka wilderness in Lyon County. Well, make that was proposed.



COURTESY BRIAN BEFFORT, FRIENDS OF NEVADA WILDERNESS
A tree in Lyon County asks: "Why do you hate me?"

federal land is sold to developers to spur economic development and generate cash for education and local park projects; meanwhile, other land is set aside as wilderness for everything from hiking to hunting. Clark County got its lands bill in 2002. Lincoln County got its lands bill in 2004. White Pine got its lands bill in 2006. The idea is to eventually hit all of Nevada's 17 counties, trimming the federal government's land holdings, giving communities an economic booster shot and preserving natural areas from irresponsible use. In all of these cases, groups such as the Nevada Wilderness Project were at the table to push for preservation.

"We've got a track record where we've done this in three counties, in urban counties and rural counties," says Nevada Wilderness Project Director John Wallin. "I think no matter what the fearmongering is, we're credible. We've been good partners with people because we're not strident and we're not ideological about this stuff. We're pragmatists. We believe in the legitimate economic needs of these communities, and that's why we participate in this process. So this notion that we're trying to shut people out and shut them down is just silly."

WHEN NATURE ATTACKS

Things went awry when it was Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties' turn at the trough. After the congressional delegation started the lands bill process in June 2007, it didn't take long for things to go sideways. Some county folks suspected the lands bill was an elaborate water grab; others saw the wilderness advocates as the prime movers behind the thing.

"The reason for [local resistance] is that this proposal came out of the blue. It wasn't like it was generated locally and taken to the commissioners," says Sanford. "We feel like the process was reversed and it came out like, 'Here's the proposal, we're gonna do it like this or nothing. And if we have to shove it down your throat, that's what we'll do.' The process was ass-backwards."

What inflamed that perception was that Nevada Wilderness Project and Friends of Nevada Wilderness put together a map that comprised their wilderness wish list for Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties. It contained a perhaps ambitious 700,000 acres of proposed wilderness. But it was an initial proposal, not an ultimatum, says Nevada Wilderness Project's Wallin.

"We threw some information out there, and instead of looking at it as a conversation-starter, it very quickly got misrepresented as this land grab," he says. And the so-called land grab outraged locals. A March 5 meeting with representatives for U.S. Sens. Reid and Ensign and U.S. Rep. Dean Heller at Smith Valley High School in Lyon County drew 700 people in opposition to the wilderness proposal. A meeting a week later in Mineral County drew 200. For them, "wilderness" translates into hamstringing local economies that have long been based on mining, livestock and off-roading.

"People don't realize how much mines contribute to the elements they use in everyday life," says Commissioner Hunewill. "And grazers have been here for 100 years, using those lands. People in Las Vegas don't understand this is an agricultural community. I know [wilderness activists] say you can still graze [on lands designated as wilderness], but I know people who from experience have found out that it's not as easy to continue grazing in a [wilderness] area as they would like to believe."

THEY CAME FROM BEYOND

Further fueling the resentment was the perception that the wilderness activists were do-gooders from outside the county, without a clue about the real lay of the land.

"These guys from Nevada Wilderness ... one's from Reno, the other gentleman is from Durango, Colo., and a third is from Alaska," says Sanford. "We look at that and say, 'What the hell are they doing telling us what to do in Nevada? You can do what you want in Colorado or Alaska, but you don't know nothing about Nevada.'"

But there were also plenty of people Lyon County who supported some kind of wilderness preservation, counters Steve Pellegrini, a fifth-generation Yerington resident.

"A lot more were for it than anyone realized," says Pellegrini, a biology teacher. "I'd like to say it was a silent majority. From my perspective, a lot of good people were misled. Somebody would say [with a wilderness designation], there'd be no hunting anymore, then someone would say something else. It was just a big scare game, misconception after misconception. How wilderness became such a lightning rod, I don't know."

The baby soon followed the bath water. The Lyon County Commission followed up April 17 with another resolution. This one asked Reid, Ensign and Heller to drop the whole Lyon County lands bill idea. It may have killed the county's opportunity to get money from a sell-off of federal land, but it hasn't stopped wilderness activists, who are now considering other strategies to protect lands in these rural counties.

Wallin says the problem isn't with wilderness, it's with bad leadership at the county level.

"I don't really understand what the confusion is when they've initiated the federal lands bill process twice with the delegation, knowing that wilderness was going to be part of the equation, and then they kind of set themselves up for failure by stoking the flames of misinformation."