

## Mineral County public reaffirms opposition to wilderness, listens to 'pluses' of lands bill, expresses distrust of government

BY JIM SANFORD • SPECIAL TO THE MVN • MAY 30, 2008

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An audience of about 60-75 people at a Mineral County Commissioner meeting in Hawthorne on May 21 reaffirmed their opposition to wilderness designations, listened intently to a presentation of "pluses" involved in a lands bill, and adamantly expressed their distrust of government in general, and the federal government in particular.

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Meeting with four representatives from U.S. Senator Harry Reid's office, including Neil Kornze, Senior Policy Advisor for Public Lands, the audience applauded each time the commissioners--generally led by Richard Bryant--restated their opposition to including any wilderness designations in any kind of lands bill.

"We don't want wilderness," said Bryant.

"We are not going to give in to these people." (See related story in this edition for additional comments on wilderness.)

What's in a lands bill?

Mineral Commissioner Jerrie Tipton opened discussion of a lands bill by saying, "I am asking for a very good idea of what it does, what it includes and does not include.

"I am afraid if Mineral County is to ever have a say, it has to be done through a lands bill type of process," she said.

Kornze responded by saying he could present a "big picture" of the lands bill by providing some examples. He explained first that the county could "drive your own economic development" or protect land it might wish to protect through a shortened process involving disposal of BLM lands. In such deals, fast-tracked via the lands bill process, the county would receive 10 percent of the funds for public projects, while 5 percent would go to education and 85 percent to local federal agencies.

"We could convey lands for county uses," he added, indicating the county would also have access to the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act under which lands in Las Vegas valley are auctioned off with counties applying for some of those funds for a variety of uses.

"This could amount to millions of dollars," he explained.

Other "positives" outlined by Kornze included county involvement in the Great Basin Restoration Initiative to meet ecologic challenges and provide for landscape-size restoration; off-highway vehicle trails such as in White Pine and Lincoln counties; dealing with tribal issues such as the expansion for the tribe in Ely; addressing renewable and alternate energy; expansion of state parks; Mineral County land for water and other uses; and the wilderness issue which has been part of all lands bills to date.

He also explained that any restrictions on use of the 10% by the county are "very broad and can include such things as public safety, transportation, "just about anything."

Kornze said that lands bills in Nevada "are not popular with the other 98 senators" because "there is a sense that these lands are public assets and if sold, that money should go to the national treasury". Nonetheless, Nevada's senators Reid and Ensign have been able to "carve them out".

Explaining that Nevada contains more federal land than any other state (around 90% according to him), Kornze said

Tipton then asked about concerns that a lands bill might include "things agreed to locally and it comes out totally different". She asked if hearings on such bills could be held in Hawthorne.

"That's a great question," Kornze responded. "They have to have hearings in Washington, but we have had town hall meetings" in Nevada communities.

Tipton asked for time for the county to complete its inventory of assets and needs. "Give us 6 months to one year and we'll know what's here," she concluded.

Distrust of government

During the questions and answer period, several people expressed a general distrust of government and