

Immediate, angry response to McKeon's wilderness bill

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Advocates for Access to Public Lands feel betrayed

Mammoth Times/Inyo Register Staff Report

In the wake of Congressman Buck McKeon's announcement last week that he has introduced legislation in the House of Representatives to designate 400,000 plus acres of Eastern Sierra lands as wilderness, it's been a case of sour grapes on the part of the group known as Advocates for Access to Public Lands (AAPL), whose response was immediate.

"...This (the current bill's provisions) is 'back-door stuff' that the public doesn't know anything about – this is a 180-degree shift on the part of Buck McKeon in terms of what he assured us he wanted to achieve and would support," said Dick Noles, AAPL co-founder.

McKeon (R-Santa Clarita) is the sponsor of House Resolution No. 6156, with a companion wilderness bill in the U.S. Senate being introduced by Senator Barbara Boxer (D-California). The two legislators had been working on their respective bills in unison of late, in an effort to gain bipartisan support for their passage in both Houses of Congress. They say their bills have resulted from a unique collaborative effort based upon input from local community leaders, leading conservation groups, sportsmen, public lands access advocates and business owners.

The two bills seek permanent wilderness status for tracts identified as the White Mountain Wilderness, Hoover Wilderness Additions, the Granite Mountain Wilderness, John Muir Wilderness Additions, the Owens River Headwaters Wilderness, the Pleasant View Ridge Wilderness, the Magic Mountain Wilderness, as well as Wild and Scenic River protection status for the Amargosa, the Owens River headwaters and the Piru Creek.

According to a statement from his press secretary Lindsey Mask, McKeon has been working to preserve and enhance recreational opportunities in the Eastern Sierra with these stakeholders since his election to office. "Since McKeon's election to represent Mono and Inyo counties in 2002 he has received thousands of letters, phone calls and e-mails expressing support for an Eastern Sierra Wilderness designation."

AAPL said, "Now (Buck) turns around and puts his support into essentially backing Senator Boxer's Wild Heritage Act which was unanimously opposed by every member of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors less than a year ago."

According to McKeon, the two bills are not one and the same. His legislation "contains 472,804 acres through the 25th District of California. Boxer's statewide bill, S. No. 493, contains almost twice as much wilderness in the 25th District – more than 840,000 acres."

McKeon's statement goes on to note that "essential components of his new legislation include important protection for snowmobile use near Bridgeport, Calif., more than 50,000 acres of Wilderness Study Area release and unrestricted access to areas such as Dumont Dunes, Sperry Wash and Laurel Lakes. Boxer's statewide Wild Heritage Act includes none of these provisions."

AAPL: "We developed a plan that provided for 50,000 acres and called for 170,000 acres

of land to be managed as a national recreation area. This alternative to a 'pure wilderness designation' was most actively championed by Mono County Supervisor Hap Hazard and agreed to by all those with whom we were interacting as a totally reasonable and workable management plan for the Whites."

According to McKeon, National Recreation Areas are "typically created to encompass non-controversial water recreation sites such as Lake Mead, Nev."

The congressman also noted that "the concept of a 170,000-acre NRA in the Inyo National Forest is neither reasonable nor workable for one of the largest unprotected roadless areas in the lower 48 states, containing the world's oldest living trees, the ancient Bristlecone Pines."

Still, says Stacy Corless of the Wilderness Society, McKeon's bill involves several areas of compromise and consensus.

— "The White Mountains wilderness boundary was cut off at the Inyo County line to accommodate Noles' request." Moreover, Corless said, no roads will be closed; OHV access to the White Mountains is maintained, including the road up to the 14,000 White Mountain Peak. Many protested the wilderness bill, claiming it would close existing roads and thereby eliminate access by those who are unable to walk.

— The ancient Bristlecone pines will get permanent, Federal protection (not as wilderness, but under the current forest management plan)

— A John Muir Wilderness boundary adjustment will secure continued access to Laurel Lakes. Due to a mapping error made 30 years ago, the Forest Service was considering closing the top of the road because it was within the wilderness boundary. This bill moves the boundary so as to keep the road open.

— This snowmobile area (mentioned above) is unprecedented and represents local individuals' work.

— The 50,000 acres of wilderness study area release is a significant amount of release. "Congressman McKeon understands what a highly charged and emotional issue wilderness designations, access, and land rights are, and he deeply appreciates that. The Congressman has worked tirelessly to visit with and include all key stakeholders as he worked towards drafting legislation and will continue to do so as the legislative process continues. He respects the work of certain local activists who are and will continue to be important as this bill moves forward, but he is extremely disappointed by recent comments that were made, especially considering how hard he worked to accommodate their primary concerns," McKeon's statement concluded.

Why wilderness?

One might wonder what all the polarization is about, why some people insist on the need for preservation of the country's wilderness, and why others declare the need to explore and use the natural resources by motorized vehicle so vital.

The Wilderness Act, enacted in 1964, states: "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

Wilderness proponents consider the environmental, social, scientific and spiritual benefits

of wilderness to be myriad. Wild places help produce clean water by protecting watersheds; improve air quality by acting as a filter for pollutants; provide critical habitat for threatened or endangered species; maintain biological diversity; offer outdoor recreation opportunities; provide scenic beauty; and serve as a haven from pressures of modern day life. See www.easternsierrawild.org to read about benefits of wilderness. Regardless of the benefits of wilderness, AAPL supporters such as Dave Mattovich strongly critiqued McKeon's proposed wilderness legislation, saying, after listening to him for an hour at last week's press conference, "...Congress promised that they would be examining all these wilderness study areas (WSA) to verify their suitability as lands with a true wilderness character – they made a promise to deal with the release of those lands that genuinely didn't rise to the level of genuine wilderness – and they absolutely have not done that as they promised they would. So, those WSAs have now become a foot-in-the-door for the well-oiled political machine that wants to keep a huge percentage of the public from using their own public lands as they should."

The Mono County Supervisors will discuss the bill at their meeting at 1 p.m., June 10 in the Lee Vining Community Center. Representatives from both offices (McKeon and Boxer) will be taking testimony. To see the maps of proposed wilderness areas visit <ftp://ftp.drivehq.com/hr6156maps/maps>.