

Supes slam wilderness bill

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By Mike Gervais

Inyo Register Staff

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Elected officials from Inyo County responded to the controversial Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act by declaring that the newly introduced legislation does not, in fact, contain any notable compromise.

The five members of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors all agreed Tuesday that some crucial language in the Eastern Sierra Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act, which intends to designate 400,000-plus acres of Eastern Sierra lands as wilderness, must be changed to protect the rights of property owners and commercial business owners.

The board is also seeking to gather input from residents, and has scheduled two tentative public meetings with representatives of both Congressman Buck McKeon and Senator Barbara Boxer, the act's sponsors, in attendance. The board also expressed hopes of having a representative from Senator Dianne Feinstein's office on hand as well.

The first meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, July 1 at the American Legion Hall in Independence and the second for Wednesday, July 2 at the Tri-County Fairgrounds in Bishop. Both are scheduled to take place at 4 p.m.

Prior to scheduling the public meetings, the supervisors took the opportunity to air their grievances, and share some unflattering words for McKeon and Boxer's legislation.

Fifth District Supervisor Richard Cervantes called the new wilderness bill "short-sighted at the least and irresponsible at worst."

According to Fourth District Supervisor Jim Bilyeu, the legislation, which is being hailed by conservationists and its supporters as a triumphant compromise, "There is very little compromise in this bill, which I think is the downfall. I personally feel it was underhanded."

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 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.

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 waterway protection status for the Amargosa Wild & Scenic River, the Owens Headwaters Wild & Scenic River, and the Piru Creek Wild & Scenic River.

First District Supervisor Linda Arcularius drafted a lengthy letter to Congressman McKeon explaining her concerns regarding the wilderness legislation.

The other board members commended Arcularius for her letter, and Supervisor Bilyeu even requested that in addition to it being sent with Arcularius' signature, the board make a couple amendments to it, and send that copy to McKeon "under the full authority" of the Board of Supervisors with the county letterhead and signatures from all five board

members.

Among the supervisors' grievances is the possibility that the areas omitted from the legislation, as part of the "compromise" for multiple-use advocates, are not protected from future wilderness designations.

"The lands that have not been designated wilderness have gained no protection for their current uses," the letter from Arcularius states. "Those lands that were not designated have no permanent protection. They have only escaped this round of wilderness designation."

"There is no protection for these other lands," no guarantee that they will remain open to the public, Bilyeu said.

According to Arcularius, state representatives also have an obligation to rethink provisions in the legislation that prohibit new claims or mining.

Cervantes commented that, with the rising cost of metals and minerals, Inyo County could possibly cash in on new mining claims, as areas of the White Mountains are rich in such minerals, but the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act has the potential to limit that.

Arcularius' letter further states that "the strength of this nation is in the ground. Our natural resources have provided for the ability of our nation to grow and prosper since our nation's founding. They have contributed to our wealth, self-reliance and sustainability as a nation."

The board also discussed how the new legislation could potentially steer would-be recreators away from Inyo County.

Bilyeu noted that it is illegal to stock non-native fish in wilderness areas. He also said that in some cases, streams, creeks and other waters flowing out of designated wilderness are off-limits for stocking, as the non-native fish may swim up-stream into the wilderness area.

According to Cervantes, many of the areas designated as wilderness in the Wild Heritage Act don't technically qualify as wilderness. The supervisors explained that wilderness designations were originally designed to protect "unspoiled" areas never before used by humans.

"Not by the wildest stretch of imagination does this fit the definition of wilderness," Cervantes said, noting that humans have used the areas outlined in the legislation for years for recreation.

"By designating wilderness that does not meet the true meaning of the definition of wilderness, the truly unique and special characteristics that set wilderness apart from our other public lands is diminished," the letter from Arcularius states.

While the Inyo County Board of Supervisors was discussing the Wild Heritage Act on Tuesday, its counterpart in Mono County hosted a public hearing in Lee Vining with representatives from Feinstein, McKeon and Boxer's offices.

The Inyo County supervisors are hoping to bring all those people to the table again in Inyo so the representatives can hear the concerns of constituents here.

"A public meeting to address this is important and imperative," Arcularius said.

*(Prior reporting from Ken Koerner contributed to this article.)*