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Congress Pushes to Keep Land Untamed

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Bills Could Add Millions of Acres Of Wilderness

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INDEX, Wash. -- With little fanfare, Congress has embarked on a push to protect as many as a dozen pristine areas this year in places ranging from the glacier-fed streams of the Wild Sky Wilderness here to West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest. By the end of the year, conservation experts predict, this drive could place as much as 2 million acres of unspoiled land under federal control, a total that rivals the wilderness acreage set aside by Congress over the previous five years.

A confluence of factors is driving this wilderness renaissance: the shift in Congress from Republican to Democratic control; environmentalists' decision to take a more pragmatic approach in which they enlist local support for their proposals by making concessions to opposing interests; and some communities' recognition that intact ecosystems can often offer a greater economic payoff than extractive industries.

"It may not seem like it on most issues, but in this one arena Congress is getting things across the goal line," said Mike Matz, executive director of the advocacy group Campaign for America's Wilderness. "Nobody gets everything they want, but by coming together, talking with age-old adversaries and seeking common ground, wilderness protection is finding Main Street support and becoming motherhood-and-apple-pie."

Against the backdrop of Bush administration policies that have opened up millions of acres of public land to oil and gas exploration, logging and other commercial uses, environmental advocates and lawmakers argue that it makes sense to cordon off more of the country's most unspoiled places.

The administration has offered more than 40 million acres in the Rockies for oil and gas drilling and other "extractive" uses, according to the Wilderness Society, and it has done the same with 70 million acres in the Alaskan Arctic. In addition, the Forest Service estimates that development eliminates 6,000 acres of the open space every day.

The administration has generally favored expanding wilderness acreage, letting Congress determine which areas should be protected and how. Part of this stems from the fact that nearly all of these bills have broad constituencies, which include local faith, business and hunting groups as well as [GOP](#) officeholders. And as Bush approaches the end of his second term, he is eyeing opportunities to leave his mark on the nation's landscape.

In the first wilderness designation this year, the Wild Sky Wilderness became law in May. It set aside more than 106,000 acres of low-elevation, old-growth forest and jagged mountain peaks crisscrossed by streams that feature wild salmon and steelhead runs.

The logging business has largely died out in Index, a town less than two hours from Seattle, and residents see the wilderness as a way to promote the recreational activities that now help drive the local economy.

"In the past 30 years, we've seen this town move into an entirely recreational economy," said Bill Cross, a former city council member in Index who helped lobby for the designation. "I see Wild Sky as an extension of that."

Wilderness areas, which have the strictest level of federal protection, account for just over 107 million acres nationwide -- 4.8 percent of the nation's land mass, roughly half of it in Alaska. Federal law prohibits mechanized transport in wilderness areas, but they are open to such activities as hiking and fishing.

In recent weeks the House has passed six wilderness bills, including Wild Sky, that would protect more than 500,000 acres. The Senate Energy and Resources Committee has approved another four wilderness bills and the panel could pass more, an effort that Chairman [Jeff Bingaman](#) (D-N.M.) said was aimed at addressing "some pent-up demand for bills that had been in the works for most of the last decade."

Although several factors have spurred the flurry of legislative activity, much of it stems from the fact that former House Resources Committee chairman Richard Pombo (R-Calif.) -- who fiercely opposed designating any new wilderness -- lost his seat in 2006. As many as a dozen bills are expected to pass this year, and another seven have been introduced recently.

Almost all 12 have bipartisan support, and many include concessions to traditional opponents such as loggers and off-road-vehicle riders. But they also show that Democrats are intent on reasserting federal authority in the realm of conservation.

"When I changed the name from Resources to Natural Resources, it wasn't just for cosmetic reasons -- it's for what I view as the real guts of the responsibility of this committee," said Pombo's successor, [Rep. Nick J. Rahall](#) (D-W.Va.). "To those critics who say, 'Why do we need new wilderness?' I say these areas already are wilderness. We simply want to preserve them as they are, as they have been for generations, and preserve them for future generations."

Some environmentalists say even these measures cannot compensate for the tens of thousands of drilling permits the administration has leased in recent years. Katie McKalip, a spokeswoman for the advocacy group Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, noted that in the past decade in Wyoming, a land area equal in size to Virginia has been leased for development.

"Our public lands, and the fish and wildlife species that depend on them, are falling victim to a management policy that effectively values one land use -- oil and gas development -- above all others," McKalip said.

Some Republicans question why the federal government would add more wilderness when it is struggling to maintain the public lands it already holds.

"If you're not preserving and taking care of what you've got, why are you adding to it?" said [Sen. Tom Coburn](#) (R-Okla.), who has placed parliamentary "holds" that are blocking action on several bills.

In an interview, Coburn said he has no problem with states designating wilderness areas if they are prepared to finance their upkeep, noting that the Forest Service has a multibillion-dollar backlog of projects. "If you want to do it, why shouldn't the state be doing it? If Oregon wants to create new wilderness, I'm all in favor of Oregon doing it."

But supporters of congressional action say that only the federal government has the capacity to protect the most vulnerable areas. [Sen. Patty Murray](#) and [Rep. Rick Larsen](#), both Democrats from Washington state, pushed to include 30,000 acres of low-elevation areas in Wild Sky on the grounds that they were ecologically critical and close to major population centers. These areas, below 3,000 feet, have a Tolkienesque landscape, with bright green, moss-covered trees and aquamarine water that locals dub "glacier milk" because the ground-up stones from glaciers give it an ethereal color.

"We call it the cleanest, coldest, clearest river in the state," said high school science teacher Mike Town, who started pushing for wilderness protection nearly a decade ago. "If you really want to protect salmon, or even

[Puget Sound](#), the water quality of the rivers that drain into Puget Sound needs to be addressed."

Murray and Larsen, whose bill made concessions to church groups, the [Boy Scouts](#) and float-plane operators in order to forge a consensus on the bill, said it took time to convince some opponents that creating wilderness would benefit the local community. The lawmakers removed a few thousand acres from the plan to placate snowmobilers, clarified that existing float-plane use could continue and ensured that church groups and the Boy Scouts could still get access to their camping grounds.

"When you say 'wilderness,' the hair goes up on the back of their necks, and they envision chains going around trees they'll never touch," Murray recalled in an interview. "It can't just be in-your-face 'We're going to protect those areas, we don't care what you think.'"

With the support of several senior Republicans, including [Sen. Larry Craig](#) (Idaho) and then-Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey, the Wild Sky bill passed the Senate three times, but Pombo repeatedly blocked it in the House.

"It was a failure of American democracy, where you had one man who prevented the will of the American people from being fulfilled," said [Rep. Jay Inslee](#) (D-Wash.), who battled Pombo on the Resources Committee. "What you're seeing right now is this one-man dam has broken."

Doug Scott, who has been working on wilderness bills for 30 years and is now policy director of the Campaign for America's Wilderness, said he thinks that someday the United States will complete the mission envisioned in the 1964 Wilderness Act. But it hasn't gotten there yet, he said.

"There will be a last acre -- we just won't know it's the last acre," he said. "And I don't think I'll live to see it."

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