

## Wilderness, schmilderness

In Nevada, wilderness-wary locals derail lands bills that could help their communities

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SMITH, NEVADA

In this tiny farm town, which lacks a stoplight or even a store, the gathering of more than 700 people on April 2 was unprecedented. And they weren't at the high school gym to watch the Bulldogs play Class A basketball; they were there to tell officials just what they thought about a proposal to turn *their* mountains into wilderness.

It was a peaceful if not entirely well-mannered crowd, with most wildly cheering those who railed against wilderness, and jeering the three lone proponents. Shouts of "go back to Santa Cruz" and "we're the public, stupid" peppered the warm evening.

Over and over, angry citizens came to the microphone to proclaim that no outsiders were going to tell them to keep their trucks and ORVs out of the hills they considered their heritage. Jim Sanford, former publisher of the local paper, summed up the mood: "I don't think this group here tonight is interested in compromise."

But without compromise, there would be no public-lands bills like the ones approved over the past six years for three other Nevada counties, bills that called for the sale of thousands of acres of federal land and -- in conjunction with a 1998 law generated billions of dollars for everything from school funding to park development. Pushed by Nevada Sens. Harry Reid, D, and John Ensign, R, the bills sought to eliminate the management headaches and local resentments that are rife in a fast-growing state where more than four of every five acres is federal property.

The bills also designated major new wilderness areas. In Congress, the rough political calculus for such bills is this: If locals get to benefit from the sale of land owned by all Americans, the broader public receives additional wilderness in return. That seemed fair enough to folks in Clark, Lincoln and White Pine counties, where a total of 164,000 acres of federal land was identified for auction and about 1.7 million acres were added to the wilderness system. And the state's congressional delegation had every reason to expect success in other counties.

But in western Nevada this winter, that calculus was faulty. In quick succession, three counties -- Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda -- rebuffed efforts to craft compromise bills for lands within their boundaries. Fear and misunderstanding fueled a revolt against what locals perceived as a land grab. And now that the state's anti-wilderness forces are energized, their efforts may derail what until recently seemed like a collaborative way to both meet local needs and protect wild lands.

**The federal government owns more** than 86 percent of Nevada, more than it owns in any other state. In some counties, the dearth of private property has limited growth, inflated property values and complicated land management. While counties with large federal holdings do get annual PILT funds (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) from the government, the payments are often a fraction of the taxes they'd receive if the land were privately owned. Esmeralda County, for example, gets only about \$60,000 a year through PILT, even though 98 percent of it is federally owned.

The first attempt at redress was the 1998 Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, which called for the sale of thousands of acres of BLM land near Las Vegas in Clark County. Thus far, about \$2.7 billion has been generated from those lands sales, and some of that revenue has also been made available to other Nevada counties through public-lands bills.

The Clark, Lincoln and White Pine lands bills were designed with local input to meet local needs. For example, the White Pine County bill created 550,000 acres of wilderness and identified 45,000 acres of BLM land for auction. Funds from those land sales will go to the state education fund, local law enforcement and fire protection, and to the BLM. In addition, the bill transferred thousands of acres of BLM land to the county and state for commercial and park projects and funded a study of off-road vehicle trail expansion.

With such successes under their belts, in 2007 Sens. Reid and Ensign and Rep. Dean Heller, R-Nev., set their sights on Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties, again hoping to craft bills that combined wilderness designation with public-land sales and other locally beneficial provisions. Senate staffers began meeting with wilderness proponents, some ranchers and a few local leaders in the three counties. But most residents and many local officials were unaware of the process until early 2008, shortly before the bills were to be drafted. They felt blindsided by the news that such legislation was being considered for their areas and that they had only a few months to be involved.

"We just found out about this in February," says Mineral County Commissioner Richard Bryant, who says he and others were "dumbfounded" when they learned that almost 500,000 acres of federal land in the county were being considered for wilderness designation.

At a May 21 meeting, the commissioners lambasted Sen. Reid's staff for not involving the counties earlier in the process. The commissioners couldn't endorse any lands bill this year, they said; they needed time to determine what wilderness would mean for activities

such as mining, geothermal development, grazing and recreation.

Lyon County residents say they were similarly surprised. Most first heard about the bill in late January, after local ranchers announced that they had met with congressional staff and representatives of the Nevada Wilderness Project to discuss how wilderness designation might affect their ranching operations.

Marianne Leinassar, whose family has run sheep in the area since 1858, says the ranchers had assumed that the wilderness would cover about 88,000 acres in the Bald Mountain area -- renamed Wovoka by local wilderness proponents -- because it had been the focus of past discussions about possible wilderness.

But at a Jan. 25 meeting, the ranchers saw maps from the Nevada Wilderness Project indicating that up to about 690,000 acres were being considered for wilderness designation in Lyon and in neighboring Mineral County. "We were all taken aback," Leinassar recalls, as they realized the size of the potential wilderness. "This was huge."

**The news that hundreds** of thousands of acres might become wilderness and that a bill to that effect could be drafted by summer spread like dust in a fast spring wind. Many didn't know what wilderness designation meant, so anything seemed possible; there was talk of fences, even razor wire stretched across the landscape -- vast areas placed off limits, with mines closed, flight paths diverted, firefighting hobbled, and military training curtailed during wartime. Rumors of conspiracy and speculation about what Reid was really up to ran wild. "They were like a tornado generating their own storm," Steve Pellegrini, a retired teacher and wilderness advocate, says of his neighbors.

Within weeks of the Jan. 25 meeting, locals formed the Coalition for Public Access. By March, membership reached 1,000, then 1,500, most from Lyon County. Residents in Mineral County also started their own chapter. "This has united just about everybody in all of our surrounding communities who are normally ... on separate sides of the fence on water issues, on grazing issues, things like that," says Emery Thran, the group's chairman. "This affected a lot of people." Residents saw wilderness not as a way to protect the natural qualities of the land, he says, but as a federal assault on what they most value.

In a place where many families arrived in the area more than 100 years ago, those values often involve a personal sense of history. Dr. Robin Titus practices medicine out of a one-physician clinic set amid an ocean of alfalfa fields. From her small office window, she can see the mountains her great grandfather mined. Some of her ancestors are buried there. And though she is an avid outdoors-woman, the idea that "outside" interests might affect local use of the nearby mountains rankles her deeply. "Somebody from out of town is trying to do something that affects the way we live here," she says. "People will tend to fight over that."

But wilderness supporters say many locals simply misunderstood the status of the

proposal, as well as what a wilderness designation would mean. The Nevada Wilderness Project had not finalized its plans when it presented its maps to ranchers at that January meeting, says Cameron Johnson, northern Nevada outreach director for the group. He says it had identified roughly 690,000 acres in Lyon and Mineral County as possible wilderness, but had yet to make specific recommendations about which areas were most suitable for designation. Contrary to rumor, he says, his organization would have recommended accommodating traditional uses, including all existing mines and grazing allotments.

Thran, however, says the problem wasn't a lack of understanding. He blames overreaching by wilderness proponents: If they had remained focused on the Bald Mountain/Wovoka area, he says, the outcome might have been different. "I don't know if it would have raised an eyebrow around here," he says, of a bill containing just the 88,000-acre Wovoka wilderness. "But now, they've pretty much angered our community. No negotiations now. I'm sorry." Titus agrees that local passions are so inflamed that reasoned discussions on the topic are nearly impossible. "People feel that if they give in at all, they'll lose it all," she says.

Local wilderness proponents still hope that at least the Wovoka area can receive protection through other legislation. Pellegrini and fellow advocate Art Shipley say that when they explain to other residents why the area is so special, many agree it deserves protection from off-roaders. But as soon as the word "wilderness" is mentioned, they say, people back away, thinking that practically the entire county is included. "I wish we didn't have that 690,000 acres hanging over us," Pellegrini says.

**The western Nevada experience** may well hang over other potential lands bills in the state, as newly-empowered anti-wilderness activists are determined to continue the fight.

Peter Liakopoulos, host of the Las Vegas talk show Rural Nevada Today, is promoting the creation of a coalition of 14 counties to fight public-lands bills. The BlueRibbon Coalition, an off-road advocacy group based in Pocatello, Idaho, is backing anti-wilderness efforts in Nevada and elsewhere, says Brian Hawthorne, the group's public-lands policy director. "I think what you're seeing is a change, a realization that you're trading wilderness for reasonableness," he says.

Part of what's changing as well is that some local officials, under pressure by the Coalition for Public Access and others, now refuse to even talk about a lands bill because of the likely wilderness component. Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties passed resolutions this winter opposing any new wilderness within their boundaries. Lyon County and Esmeralda County also passed resolutions rejecting any lands bill that designated new wilderness, effectively shutting off further consideration of any lands bill.

Mineral County commissioners put lands bill discussions in limbo earlier this spring, when they said they weren't ready to work with Senate staffers. Mineral County Commissioner Jerrie Tipton still says a carefully crafted lands bill is critical to her county's economic future, and she, for one, would consider some wilderness as part of the

package. "(Federal land ownership) is part of the reason we're so damn poor," she says. But overcoming a tidal wave of opposition may be impossible at this time, she says: "A year ago, I would have said that we can work through it. Today, I don't know."

The only hope is to fully engage residents in the design of the lands bill, Tipton says. "These people (local citizens) have to be brought into it, or it's not going to work," she says. "They need to have a hand in the crafting of the vision, or we're all going to be tarred and feathered."

Without local residents and governments on board, there's little chance that Sens. Reid and Ensign and Rep. Heller will press forward on these bills. A modest lands bill for Carson City (which includes the former Ormsby County) is progressing without rancor -- in part because the county contains no chunks of federal land large enough to qualify for wilderness. Jon Summers, Sen. Reid's communication director, says, "We said from the beginning we're not going to force this down anyone's throat."

*The author is a freelance writer in Northern California.*