

Citizens debate wilderness bill

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The Advocates for Access to Public Lands hands out signs during Wednesday's public hearing on the Wild Heritage Act. Hundreds of residents and visitors from both sides of the issue attended the meeting to go on record with their feelings about the controversial legislation. Photo by Debbie Murphy

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More than 600 crowded into the Charles Brown Auditorium at the TriCounty Fairgrounds Wednesday to record their views on the Boxer/McKeon Wild Heritage Act that would add 430,000 acres of Wilderness designation in Inyo and Mono counties.

The meeting, the second sponsored by the Inyo Board of Supervisors, was more evenly divided than Tuesday's Independence session, but left as many questions unanswered and disagreements unresolved.

One hundred of those in attendance spoke on the issue, roughly half for the Wilderness Bill. Judging from the lines formed at a table manned by members of Advocates for Access to Public Lands, more than half were against.

The differences were as much cultural as they were defined by the issue of Wilderness. The one point of agreement was a love for the wildness of the land. Who could best protect it and whether it needed additional protections were at issue.

Proponents of the bill acknowledged that it was a compromise; those against saw it as a sell-out. Proponents applauded the protection of wild areas; those against looked at the designation as additional layers of regulation and restriction. Proponents came from both Inyo and Mono counties as well as communities in Southern California.

Many of those against the bill represented generations of Eastern Sierra families who have seen their access to the mountains and deserts restricted over the years.

The meeting began with Bob Haueter, Rep. Buck McKeon's deputy chief of staff, outlining elements of the bill. In terms of compromise, Sen. Barbara Boxer lost nearly 400,000 acres from her original intent to add the Wilderness designation to 800,000 acres. McKeon ended up with nearly 400,000 more acres than he wanted, but did get significant concessions and 50,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas (Masonic, Mormon

Meadow and Walford Springs) released. In addition, there will be no closures of authorized roads in the added areas, no loss of water rights or the ability to maintain those water rights for ranchers and farmers and no additional Wilderness designation in the White/Inyo ranges in Inyo County.

Proponents of the bill testified that these concessions provided “something for everyone” especially continued vehicle access and guaranteed maintenance of cherry stemmed roads and trails.

(Existing roads and trails are “cherry stemmed” with rights of way that allow maintenance in the case of washout or rockslide. The current agreement extends the right of way on trails from 30 to 75-feet either side of center on trails. Gravel roads have 100-feet either side of center.)

Many of those against had been involved in the Forest Service’s Route Designation process in non-Wilderness areas of the Inyo National Forest where the definition of “authorized” came under scrutiny. They didn’t trust the permanence of the concession. What some viewed as a rush to get the bill enacted, Haueter explained as a political reality, noting that the Democrat’s narrow control over both Houses would probably expand after the 2008 election. Haueter anticipated that a Boxer Wilderness Bill introduced after January 2009 would roll over the community with no compromise or concessions “like the Feinstein Desert Protection Act of 1994.”

Many of the individual issues surrounding Wilderness designations played out like a tennis game. Concern was expressed over the ability to deal with wildland fires in Wilderness areas in light of equipment restrictions – especially with the proposed additions close to communities. Rich Fairbanks of the Wilderness Society said chain saws and aerial water drops were often used in Wilderness areas. Another speaker agreed that adequate equipment was allowed on fires and for trail maintenance. Dale Schmidt of Swall Meadows said he had been on fires in Wilderness, noting that it took a day to get approvals for chain saws in Yellowstone, at which point the fire was beyond containment with hand tools.

Speakers such as Andy Boyd supported the concept of wilderness as long as it met the definition of “pristine and untrammeled” laid out in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Fourth District Supervisor Jim Bilyeu noted that the mining community west of Independence once had a population of 10,000 but was now being proposed as Wilderness. Sally Miller of the Wilderness Society addressing the issue of “purity,” noted bridges and evidence of mining and logging operations in existing Wilderness. She quoted the late Idaho Sen. Frank Church, sponsor of the Wilderness Act of 1964, allowing for evidence of man’s presence in designated areas with the intent that those areas would return to their original state under the protection of the Act.

Steve White contended that the proposed Wilderness would not survive without the designation. Mary Baker said, “Sometimes too much protection is not a good thing.” Greg Weirick said there is still work to be done to release the balance of the Wilderness Study Areas. “There is a 10 to one ratio between lands still in WSA status and those released,” he said. Daniel Pritchard wanted a follow-up bill to designate Papoose Flats in the Inyo Mountain as Wilderness. Other speakers called for inclusion of Table Mountain and Coyote in future legislation.

Supporters of the legislation talked about the draw of additional tourists to Wilderness areas. Those against maintained that Wilderness back packers don’t eat in local

restaurants or stay in local motels.

Supporters from Southern California mentioned open areas that had fallen to development in their communities. Locals pointed out that 97 percent of Inyo County was already under government ownership and not prey to developers.

Access advocates wanted a guarantee that roads would remain open. No one could give them that.

And so it went.