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Sunrise Mountain land release urged by BLM to aid area's cleanup

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WASHINGTON -- The Bureau of Land Management on Wednesday renewed a call for Congress to release 10,240 acres of federal land at Sunrise Mountain from wilderness study, which the agency said would make it easier to remove trash and manage other evidence of sprawl on the eastern outskirts of Las Vegas.

The BLM's request has gained little attention on Capitol Hill. In Nevada, leaders of several environmental groups were critical, saying the agency essentially was giving up on land that has proved difficult to manage.

"It's a bad sign when the BLM repeatedly fails to do its job under the law and then asks Congress to endorse their failure," said John Wallin, director of the Nevada Wilderness Project.

BLM is required to protect wilderness study areas by generally banning motor vehicles and other markings of development until Congress decides whether to designate them as official wilderness.

But wilderness bills are extraordinarily hard to pass in Congress as they usually pit the interests of developers, preservationists, landowners, recreation enthusiasts, local governments and others.

In Nevada, more than 2.55 million acres remain designated for wilderness study, according to the BLM.

Testifying in the Senate on Wednesday, BLM Assistant Director Michael Nedd said the Sunrise Mountain area that has been reached by sprawl will never be mistaken for pristine and should be released from wilderness study.

Sections show wear from off-road vehicle use and illegal trash dumping. Roads, power lines and communications towers dot the landscape. Neighborhoods are encroaching.

The area "is in a clearly unnatural condition," Nedd said.

The agency's comments came as the Senate public lands subcommittee considered a bill that would release 65 acres from Sunrise Mountain wilderness study for flood control in foothill neighborhoods.

Nedd said BLM supported the bill by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., but recommended senators go even further and release the entire area from the wilderness study designation it has held for decades.

Removing the wilderness study label would enable trash trucks to remove litter and to allow "fencing off areas to protect sensitive resources values," Nedd said in his written testimony. He added it would allow construction of additional storm water basins as part of the cleanup of the Sunrise Landfill.

According to the BLM, Gypsum Cave, in the northwestern corner of the study area, contains some of the earliest evidence of man in Nevada. The bearpoppy, an endangered plant that typically prefers gypsum soils, is found in the same area.

The BLM's recommendation did not draw a response from committee members who heard testimony on the Southern Nevada flood control bill and nine others reviewed at the hearing.

Reid "is not closed off to the idea," spokesman Jon Summers said, but does not want it debated as part of the flood control bill that would convey the 65 acres to Clark County to be incorporated into a stormwater detention basin.

"What BLM is proposing is something different that would likely require its own action," Summers said.

In a statement he sent to the Senate committee, Reid said, "I do not take the release of wilderness study lands lightly."

Nedd delivered a similar message in October when the House was considering a similar flood control bill by Rep. Jon Porter, R-Nev.

The agency was ignored as the House went on to pass the bill in March.

Removing Sunrise Mountain from wilderness study "is not something we are opposed to, but our intention with the flood control bill was flood control," said Matt Leffingwell, a Porter spokesman.

Wallin said the BLM was sending troubling signals.

"We recognize that Sunrise is a stressed little wilderness area that has real wilderness management challenges," Wallin said, calling it "an urban wildlands that has died of a thousand cuts over the years.

"But it is dismaying that the BLM's thinking is that we have failed and that Congress should endorse that lack of effectiveness," Wallin said. "It only encourages agencies that manage federal lands to throw up their hands and say this is too hard."

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