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Bill would protect huge chunk of California land

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Published 12:00 am PDT Saturday, August 16, 2008

WASHINGTON – If California's Democratic Sen. Barbara Boxer gets her way, Congress will vote next month to designate nearly 800,000 acres of California land – an area larger than Rhode Island – as federally protected wilderness.

The House has already signed off on some of the land, giving the designation for nearly a half-million acres in six states. Roughly 60 percent of the land approved by the House is in California.

While few pieces of major legislation are moving in the current Congress, wilderness bills have been a notable exception, and it has been one of the most striking changes caused by the Democratic takeover of Congress last year.

By the time the current session ends, environmentalists say, there's a good chance that an additional 2 million acres of wilderness could be declared off-limits to development. That would double the amount set aside in the last two-year congressional session, when Republicans were in the majority.

No other state has as much at stake as California. If approved, it would be the largest expansion of protected wilderness in the state since 1994, when Congress preserved more than 7 million acres by establishing Death Valley and Joshua Tree national parks and Mojave National Preserve.

This year's largest proposal for California, sponsored by Boxer and co-sponsored by Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, would designate more than 470,000 acres in Mono, Inyo and Los Angeles counties as wilderness, along with 52 miles of Amargosa River in Death Valley and Owens River's headwaters. It's called the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act.

"It's an historic opportunity, and I think it hearkens back to the values people had when the Wilderness Act was first published in 1964," said Barbara Hill, executive director of the Oakland-based California Wilderness Coalition.

The Wilderness Act, signed into law by President Johnson, closes all designated lands to commercial and recreational development. It defines a wilderness area as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The land can be used only for such things as hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, hunting or fishing. There can be no mining, no energy exploration, no vehicles and no permanent camps or structures.

Opponents say it's elitist to keep recreational users, including snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles, off public lands intended to benefit everyone.

"We're very concerned with this big mass push for wilderness that's going on right now," said Greg Mumm, executive director of the Idaho-based Blue Ribbon Coalition, which wants to keep public lands open to motorcyclists, ATV riders, snowmobilers and others. "There are better

choices in today's world for protecting that land and preserving the access that's so needed for recreation."

As members of Congress gear up to debate the plans when they return to work in September, environmentalists are banking on support from an unlikely source to get them approved: the White House.

While the Bush administration has proposed oil drilling in the Alaska wilderness and backs a plan to allow loaded guns in national parks, many environmentalists believe Bush would sign wilderness bills as a way to put a stamp on the U.S. park system in the closing months of his presidency.

Getting this far has been a long fight for environmentalists, who worked hard to influence the 2006 elections. Not only was Boxer elevated to the head of the Senate's environment committee, the elections brought the defeat of their biggest political enemy, Republican Rep. Richard Pombo of Tracy, who opposed most wilderness bills and had the power to block them.

Rep. Nick Rahall, D-West Virginia, chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, said his predecessor Pombo "chose to ignore wilderness proposals even when there was a great deal of consensus in support of them."

Rahall said Congress is now working in a bipartisan manner "to ensure that the land is preserved as God intended."

The House has already approved two California-specific bills, both in Boxer's plan. One bill would preserve nearly 115,000 acres of public land within Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park, including Redwood Mountain Grove and Old Hockett Trail, one of the first cross-Sierra routes in the southern Sierra. The other bill would protect nearly 200,000 acres in Riverside County that provide habitat for bighorn sheep, desert tortoises, bald eagles and mule deer.

Four California representatives – Democrat Jim Costa of Fresno and Republicans Mary Bono of Palm Springs, Howard "Buck" McKeon of Santa Clarita and Devin Nunes of Tulare – have introduced companion wilderness bills in the House. Feinstein is co-sponsor of both the House-passed bills in the Senate.

Environmentalists say the fight should come to a head in the Senate in mid-September, when the Energy and Natural Resources Committee decides whether to include the proposals in a public lands bill.

Boxer has already run into opposition from Oklahoma Republican Sen. Tom Coburn, who argues the federal government is struggling to maintain its parks. If more wilderness areas are created, he said, states should pay for their upkeep, not federal taxpayers.

Backers of the legislation say there would be no added costs because the federal government owns the property and the only question is how to use the land.

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