

Wilderness bill undergoes changes

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By Mike Gervais and Stacey Powells
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Following extensive input from the communities of Inyo and Mono counties, Rep. Buck McKeon and Senator Barbara Boxer have made several changes to the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains Wild Heritage Act.

With Congress preparing to vote next month, the Inyo County Board of Supervisors has yet to take an official stance on the bill, but the recent changes won unanimous support this summer from both the Mono County Board of Supervisors and Mammoth Town Council.

The overall size of the proposed wilderness bill in the Eastern Sierra remains relatively the same, at around 433,000 acres, but there have been additions to wilderness and many boundary adjustments resulting in deletions to the proposal.

Forty amendments have been made to the bill since a public meeting held in Mono County in June to gather information from citizens regarding their feelings about the bill. The changes made to the bill include the elimination of John Muir sections 1 and 2, which will allow pack stations to continue operating day rides in those areas. Cell-phone tower placement, earthquake monitoring and snowmobile uses would have also been impacted by the wilderness additions had John Muir 1 and 2 not been eliminated.

More than 7,000 acres have been dropped from S.B. 3069 in the Sherwin Lakes and McGee Mountain areas.

According to McKeon's office, the legislators have removed 3,838 acres in the Laurel/Sherwin Lakes area from the wilderness bill in response to significant public outcry.

Additionally, 4,487 acres have been cut out of the bill in the McGee Mountain area in the John Muir Wilderness.

The legislators have also made changes to the bill in response from the agricultural communities, local and federal government entities and recreation enthusiasts.

According to McKeon's Web site, Crater Flat, in Mono County, has been removed from the wilderness proposal in response from residents who use the area in winter time to snowmobile.

"After extensive consultation with the local agricultural community, several changes have been made to drainages on the west side of the White Mountains," said McKeon. Those changes will allow farmers and ranchers to access water, which can be scarce, from areas that would have been included in the wilderness.

Some of the recent amendments to the Wild Heritage Act came in response to concerns expressed by the U.S. Forest Service.

McKeon and Boxer have made changes to the size of "cherry stems" along unimproved roads. The corridors have been changed from 30 feet off the center line of road in either direction to 75 feet off center line of road in either direction.

Cherry stem widths for improved maintained dirt roads will remain 100 feet off center line in either direction and cherry stem widths for paved roads will remain 300 feet off center line in either direction.

The rights-of-way along the roads within the wilderness will reportedly allow for easier maintenance.

McKeon and Boxer also worked with the U.S. Forest Service to help alleviate some fire concerns brought on by the wilderness bill.

According to McKeon's Web site, "the boundary near Swall Meadows was pulled back from the community to address fire concerns."

That move will give firefighters and residents a buffer zone, allowing for the removal of overgrown and dead brush in case of a wild fire.

A small adjustment requested by the Green Monster Mine owners in the eastern White Mountains has also been made, allowing the owners to operate that mine.

Two Forest Service-requested boundary additions to the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest have also been made to the Wild Heritage Act.

About 900 acres of wilderness has been proposed near the southern boundary of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest and in the Patriarch Grove in the northern portion of the proposed forest. These additions, the Forest Service hopes, will protect additional groves and individual trees that are more than 3,000 years old.

Residents still have some time to have their opinions heard and possible changes made regarding the Wild Heritage Act before the bill goes to vote next month.

Sept. 11 is a mark-up hearing in which Congress will take action on the bill, complete it and then move it forward. Sept. 12 is another hearing from the Natural Resources Committee.

"This legislation would permanently protect the stunning landscapes of the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains as wilderness, while at the same time providing for increased visitation and economic growth with the creation of the Bridgeport Winter Recreation area and the release of over 50,000 acres of wilderness study area," said McKeon. "Senator Boxer and I continue to refine the language of the bill to better serve the needs of all our constituents."

The proposed changes also include:

- Approximately 520 acres in the vicinity of Tioga Lake have been added at the request of local stakeholders.
- The Owens River Headwaters unit of the Ansel Adams Wilderness Additions has been renamed the "Owens River Headwaters Proposed Wilderness."
- Regarding Granite Mountain Proposed Wilderness, several unauthorized vehicle routes have been eliminated. This resulted in minimal change in acreage.
- Roughly 3,800 acres in the vicinity of Mount Conness have been added at the request of local stakeholders.

Owens River Headwaters Proposed Wilderness (formerly an Ansel Adams Addition)

- The proposed boundary has been moved farther west of Crater Flat so as to exclude areas used by snowmobiles and assure that the entire pumice flat remains open to snowmobile use. This has resulted in a slight reduction in acreage. This change was made at the request of Mammoth Mountain Ski Area and local snowmobilers.

– To address fire management concerns, the proposed boundary has been moved farther south to the prominent visible ridge line visible from the community of June Lake. This reduces the size of the proposed wilderness. This will also assure there is no potential effect of the wilderness proposal on the California Department of Transportation avalanche control facility (Gas-Ex) for State Route 158 above June Lake.

White Mountains Proposed Wilderness

– At the request of stakeholders, approximately 9,000 acres in the vicinity of Mount Blanco have been added to the southern end of the proposed wilderness in Mono County.

– A small adjustment has been made to move the proposed boundary away from the Silver Lode Mine at the request of the mining operator. This reduces the size of the proposed wilderness by approximately 25 acres.

– In response to concerns from agricultural interests, adjustments have been made to the proposed wilderness boundaries around six streams (Montgomery Creek, Marble Creek, Middle Creek, Birch Creek, Cottonwood Creek, Milner Creek) to provide a non-wilderness buffer around existing water storage and diversion facilities. This reduces the size of the proposed wilderness.

For a full list of the changes, amendments and maps, go to www.mckee.house.gov.