

Two Cents Worth: Trust in government low; CPA expands influence Reid rep forced to respond; Nevada committee takes action; Feinstein seeks more wilderness

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Ain't trust in our federal government grand? It's truly a shame that today, Americans actually fear what their federal government will do "to them" more than look forward to what it can do "for them." All the glitz and glamour of the national party conventions--Democrats this week and Republicans next --can't begin to change the distrust among the peons across the United States.

When I used the term 'peons,' I am, of course ,referring to the 'little' people like you and I; and if that's not politically correct, I'm sorry.

Those of us right here in Mason and Smith Valleys continue to hold our breath while we await what we anticipate to be, at the very least, a massive disruption, and more than likely a deadly challenge, to our agricultural-based economy and our beloved rural lifestyles when the long-awaited Walker River Basin Project legislation hits the fan.

Even those on the opposite side--those to whom Senator Harry Reid has pledged his undying support--must be on pins and needles until they see what actually comes out for this. Their trust level isn't much higher than ours.

The delay in the draft legislation promised in June from our Congressional delegation (which seemingly is led around by the nose by the powerful Majority Leader) can leave us with only two unescapable conclusions: Either (1) really meaningful negotiations that could result in legislation that is not too bad after all, are taking place; or (2) if history is the measuring stick, it will be worse than we ever imagined.

CPA expands influence

Think the Coalition for Public Access (CPA) formed during our own wilderness/public lands bill battles has been quiet recently?

Perhaps somewhat quiet, but certainly not inactive. The CPA's sphere of influence has expanded since its creation of February of this year to now include residents in Lyon, Mineral, Esmeralda, Douglas, Nye, Churchill, and Washoe Counties, along with Carson City and many areas in California; and the group, which may soon become a formal nonprofit corporation, is reaching out to citizens in Pershing, Eureka, Humboldt and Storey Counties.

Local CPA members attended the Legislative Committee on Public Lands meeting in Lovelock just last week.

During the discussion, it was indicated there are Wilderness Study Areas in Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda Counties that, at some point years ago, were evaluated but failed to meet the criteria for wilderness established by the 1964 Wilderness Act. The federal agency (BLM or Forest Service) that has administrative jurisdiction over these public lands makes the determination with respect to meeting or failing the criteria.

Despite the fact that these areas failed the test for wilderness years ago, they remain WSAs, with all of the access and mineral and energy exploration restrictions that go with a WSA designation.

In short, nobody has ever bothered to return them to the proper multi-use status. Wilderness groups love this because it effectively locks these areas away from the public even though the lands don't meet the wilderness threshold.

Perhaps wilderness proponents would engender more trust in the public if they didn't try to lock away forever lands that do not meet the wilderness descriptions.

CPA has expressed the belief that it is time to push the federal government to return these lands to multiple-use status. The first step was submitting a proposal to the Joint Legislative Committee on Public Lands and appearing before the committee.

In the end, the committee agreed, and State Senator Mark Amodei (with support from Senator Dean Rhoads) was successful in passing a motion that will allow this topic to go forward to the Senate Natural Resources Committee for hearings.

The ultimate goal? How about a joint resolution from the Nevada Legislature to Congress expressing the absolute need to return failed WSAs to multiple-use status?

The CPA intends to reach out to other open access organizations, especially in the Western United States, and to encourage them to do the same.

The battle has just begun.

Status of Lyon/Mineral lands bill?

During the public comment portion of the LCPL meeting, a representative from U.S. Senator Harry Reid's office told the group how wonderfully a Carson City Lands Bill has been working. But, the state committee did not let Matt Tuma off the hook that easily.

Senator Amodei asked him what the status for the Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda lands bills is. After an apparent unrelated response, the senator asked him a second time. Tuma then gave up the answer that there were no actions taken on any lands bills from these three Nevada counties.

Interestingly enough, John Tull of the Nevada Wilderness Project rose during public comment to speak against CPA's recommendation (Agenda Item #10) to release WSA lands that don't meet the definition, that WSAs released by the BLM be released by Congress; and that no lands bills be approved by Congress without local county approval.

After hearing that the item was "out," Tull reportedly told the committee that a move to have public lands declared multi-use is unconstitutional and that another item was unnecessary because the "roadless" issue is tied up in the courts.

But Tull apparently left before the LCPL voted to send Agenda Item #10 to a hearing before the Natural Resources Committee. Then the committee approved the item asking Congress to permanently establish areas of public land for multiple use as identified by local county boards.

Locals described Senator Amodei as riding to the rescue, with a big assist from Senator Rhoads.

Political competition for wilderness

Remember when the wilderness proposal for Inyo and Mono Counties in California was changed when it got to Congress?

That Boxer/McKeon wilderness bill is still working its way through Congress. Following public hearings and a specific proposal from the local level, the acreage has grown by another 8,000 thus far once it got to Washington, D.C.

One locally-proposed wilderness area near Mammoth was subtracted and new areas proposed to be added.

Well, apparently sponsorship of wilderness bills is in vogue in the Golden State.

Despite promises that the Wild Heritage Act sponsored by Senator Barbara Boxer and Congressman Buck McKeon would be the last proposed wilderness bill, the Nevada Legislature has passed a bill to establish the next

would be the last requested within Inyo County, now Senator Diane Feinstein wants to get into the act.

The Inyo Register reports that Feinstein is "looking at several new wilderness designations in southern Inyo that top officials are saying would hinder potential revenue sources, job opportunities and recreation in the area".

The California Wilderness Coalition has approached Feinstein seeking several new wilderness designations in southern California, five of which are proposed for Inyo County's Fifth District, including areas of Death Valley.

The five new proposals include the Great Falls Basin Wilderness located near Trona on the southeast side of China Lake Naval Weapons Station; the Malpais Mesa proposed wilderness addition on the west side of Death Valley National Park; the Slate Range proposed wilderness just west of the Great Falls Basin proposal; and two wilderness additions within Death Valley National Park, one of which includes the area around the Ubehebe Crater, but does not include the crater itself.

At least the Inyo Supervisors have been asked to review and draft a response to the Senator before any draft legislation is undertaken. The newspaper says this is only a request of the Senator at this stage, and she has not agreed to carry any legislation.

Inyo County concerns

The board agreed to outline its concerns, which include: (a) these proposals don't fit the definition of wilderness; (b) mining and rich natural resources are found in the area, with companies researching the possibility of opening mining claims, and two existing mines operate in the Slate Range area now; and (c) there are hopes of finding a location for a geothermal plant in the proposed areas.

"This is about economic opportunities for Inyo County being locked up," said Supervisor Jim Bilyeu. If the wilderness designation is pushed through, the area would be off limits to mining and industry of any kind.

Supervisor Cervantes charged the idea was a 'nefarious plot' by environmentalist to outlaw mining in Inyo County's mineral-rich areas.

One proposal is described as providing a "buffer zone" for the (China Lake) navy base, but Cervantes explained, "Everybody who's been out there knows that you can't wander onto the base without knowing about it; there are signs everywhere."

Another Supervisor, Susan Cash, said the buffer zone idea doesn't hold water and added that wilderness designations are not designed to provide 'buffer' zones for military installations, but to protect "unchanged and unspoiled" areas.

She also said many of the areas certainly do not fit the description of "unchanged and unspoiled."

"My position is that I don't support any additional wilderness designation unless it fits the 1960s definition," said Bilyeu, who explained that definition says the designated land must be "unspoiled."

Sounds to me like Senator Feinstein has her answer about how the local elected officials feel about additional wilderness designations. Will she listen?

Perhaps one more sentence in the story indirectly answers that question. While Supervisor Linda Arculrius said she was grateful to the Senator for discussing the proposals with the board before drafting legislation--something that did not happen with the Boxer/McKeon Wild Heritage Act--the story says this gives the county the opportunity to work with the legislators to be sure the county's needs are met before legislation is drafted.

There's that argument once again. Wilderness is coming, so what do you want in return? Notice the sentence always says "before" legislation is drafted, not "if."

Does that sound at all familiar to Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda residents in Nevada?

Was there ever any doubt the Commissioners of these three counties in our Silver State made the right decision in turning down wilderness proposals?

Concerns over two hills

concerns over the bill

Two bill proposals before Congress should draw concern.

One is the Clean Water Restoration Act (HR2421), which could essentially give control of wetlands and other lands to the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency. This could be construed as a direct attack on farmers, ranchers and the general public.

The second is the Omnibus Public Lands Bill (S3213). This piece of legislation proposes to lump in excess of 90 bills into a single piece of legislation--sometimes without the benefit of public hearings. And that's how our lawmakers like it--keep the public involvement out.

There could very well be some valuable legislation in S3213, but it could also include a whole lot of poor legislation as well.