



October 8, 2008

Heller tells CPA wilderness should be designated sparingly, and in areas that actually deserve it

*By Jim Sanford
Special to the MVN*

"In the future, I will only engage in development of lands bills at the invitation and request of local officials."

That was part of a response by Nevada Congressman Dean Heller (R) to a questionnaire sent by the Coalition for Public Access (CPA), the public advocacy group formed this year in Lyon and Mineral Counties to successfully battle suggested lands bill and wilderness proposals and thereby keep the state's lands open for multiple use.

The CPA mailed separate questionnaires for a variety of elected offices and required a returned receipt in each case to track receipt and participation. This is the first of several stories leading up to the November General Election as the organization presents those responses for voter consideration. The CPA chose not to endorse any candidate but to try to educate the public via this process.

** No Jill Derby response

Democratic congressional challenger Jill Derby failed to submit a response to the CPA questionnaire, but a return receipt indicated she had received it.

** Heller: Designate wilderness sparingly

Incumbent Congressman Dean Heller responded to the CPA questionnaire, but did so in letter format, rather than directly responding to the 7 questions.

His letter reads in part: "As a lifelong Nevadan and outdoorsman, I grew up hunting and fishing, horseback riding and using OHVs in Nevada -- largely on public lands. In a state that is approximately 85% federally controlled, it is important for the public to have access to these lands for recreation; for local governments to have access to rights-of-way; and for ranchers to be permitted to continue to utilize grazing allotments their families have used for generations. For these reasons and others, I support multiple-use management of federal land and believe that any efforts to limit or alter access should be fully scrutinized and done in consultation with local citizens."

Heller added: "Because of this philosophy, I took the concerns of the citizens of Lyon and Mineral Counties to Senators Reid and Ensign and encouraged them to take another look at how the lands bill process was being done. For this reason, efforts to develop comprehensive land legislation in Lyon and Mineral County have stopped, a bill was never drafted, and no further action is planned. Additionally, given the importance that was placed on community involvement in the lands bill process, lands bill efforts stopped in Esmeralda County after the initial scoping meeting."

"It is my belief that local citizens and elected officials should be fully engaged in the development of public land legislation and terms of these bills should not be forced on the public. In the future, I will only engage in the development of lands bills at the invitation and request of local officials. Collaboration can only be successful when all stakeholders have the opportunity to participate in an open and transparent process, and the support of local communities is essential in good government."

Heller said he would be "supportive of legislation allowing a more efficient mechanism for administrative disposal of appropriate federal lands" but added, "the current political environment would prevent a bill like that from passing Congress.

He explained there are currently 64 Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) in Nevada, "all of which are managed as wilderness despite the fact that they have not received an official designation by Congress", which is the only body that can designate or release wilderness.

The Congressman explained that Congress can "create a modified type of wilderness where the size of WSA's are reduced, current cherry stem roads can continue to be used, and grazing would be allowed to continue when receiving an official designation. This type of modified wilderness can be created through federal legislation, and we have precedent for this type of legislative action in Nevada."

"True 'wilderness areas' that limit access should only be designated sparingly and only in areas that actually deserve it," Heller continued. Such bills should only be developed "as a collaborative effort by all stakeholders and the end product should be acceptable to all involved. However, for that process to work, flexibility is required by all parties involved and the CPA must understand that each county in Nevada has different needs. As such, each county's needs and requests will be considered individually."

Congressman Heller said he "will continue to support mining, ranching, recreation and the development of renewable energy on public lands (105,000 square miles in Nevada's Second Congressional District) while I am in Congress."

"We have common goals and together we can ensure public access and encourage economic development throughout Nevada," he concluded.

CPA questions outlined

The questions actually asked in the CPA election campaign questionnaire were as follows:

COALITION FOR PUBLIC ACCESS QUESTIONNAIRE TO CANDIDATES FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

1. Given the fact that all lands bills (both enacted and withdrawn) have contained a transfer of public lands to the counties, can you visualize alternative means through which counties might achieve the same objectives? Are there public lands in your congressional district that you would like to see transferred from the Federal government to the counties or put up for sale to the public? How important is it for counties to obtain Federal lands? Please discuss your answer.
2. The Nevada Congressional delegation has often described lands bills as a "win-win" situation for all concerned, yet the majority of residents in rural counties do not appear to agree with this. What is your view? Please explain.
3. If the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) moved to close or restrict access to multi-use public lands within your district that are under their administrative jurisdiction, would you oppose such an action? Please briefly discuss.
4. Given the actions taken in 2008 by Lyon, Mineral, and Esmeralda Counties with regard to lands bills, would you encourage meetings between wilderness/restricted access organizations and open access advocacy groups in order to reach accord on future wilderness goals? Would you be willing to facilitate these through your personal participation?
5. Do you support incorporating multi-use public lands in to wilderness even when these lands have been determined by the appropriate Federal agency to not meet the established criteria for wilderness contained in the 1964 Wilderness Act? Should the criteria for designating areas as wilderness be relaxed? Please discuss.

6. How do you see the designation of wilderness areas in Nevada affecting economic development? Do you view increasing the size of wilderness areas in the state as increasing Nevada's economic health? If so, how? With regard to solar, geothermal, and wind energy projects, will increasing the amount of wilderness have any effect on their development?

7. Do you support the idea that a lands bill must have a wilderness component? Please discuss.
