



Wilderness hearing brings out the boos for new proposal

Saturday, 20 December 2008

By Mike Gervais

Register Staff

12-18-2008

Forty people from Bishop to Keeler, and even Southern California and Utah, signed up Tuesday evening to weigh in on five new wilderness designations proposed for Southern Inyo.

Of the three dozen speakers, no one came forward at the extended Board of Supervisors session in Lone Pine to voice their support for the wilderness proposals.

Those in opposition of the proposals turned out in droves to tell the Board of Supervisors why they feel the proposed designations are wrong for Inyo County.

First District Supervisor and Board Chair Linda Arcularius opened the meeting by reminding those in attendance that the discussion was in reference to a proposal from the California Wilderness Coalition to Senator Dianne Feinstein to add five new wilderness designations to areas of Southern Inyo County. In all, the new proposals aim to pin a wilderness designation on 700,000 acres of land.

“Senator Feinstein has not agreed to carry this legislation,” Arcularius said, adding that the community has an opportunity to share their opinions with the senator before she makes a decision on the proposal.



Inyo County residents nearly filled Statham Hall Tuesday for another public hearing about proposed wilderness designations. Photo by Mike Gervais

“I am against any additional wilderness in Inyo County,” said Keeler resident Sam Wasson, “there’s enough of that already, in fact, we’re overloaded.”

That sentiment was echoed by virtually every speaker at the meeting to one degree or another.

Greg Weirick, of the Advocates for Access to Public Lands (AAPL), said that 28 percent of California’s wilderness is located in Inyo County, creating approximately four million acres of wilderness here.

Weirick also said that the 700,000 acres that are now being considered for wilderness were “deemed inappropriate” for a similar designation during discussions about the 1994 Desert Protection Act.

Representatives from AAPL submitted nine letters to the board expressing opposition to the proposals from residents who could not make the Tuesday evening meeting.

“What makes it wilderness now, if it wasn’t in 1994?” one resident asked.

Another speaker said that the areas being considered are still inappropriate for wilderness designations because they are not “pristine and unspoiled” by human activities. “There are roads spider-webbed all over there,” he said.

But the roads cutting through the areas proposed for wilderness designations are only a small part of the human footprint left on the land.

Most speakers at the hearing expressed concerns about the struggling mining industry, and how the wilderness proposals, if passed into law, could drive the industry out of the county completely.

“Wilderness feeds men’s souls, but industry feeds their children,” said Mike Patterson, owner of Cerro Cordo mines, before he went on record opposing the proposed wilderness designations because it could potentially put him, and many others throughout the county, out of business.

“This seems to be directly aimed at mining,” said Paul Skinner of Lone Pine. “Our country has been regulated and permitted out of business. One tenth of one percent of the surface of the nation is affected by mining. I am not against wilderness, I’m against

foolishness in wilderness.”

“We have over 300 minerals here that can’t be found anywhere else in the world,” said self-proclaimed rock hound and Lone Pine resident Francis Graham, adding that, aside from the mining potential, there are more than 130 rockhound clubs in California, “and they all come here” to practice their hobby.

“Every time they stop us from mining they put this country at risk,” said Lone Pine resident and Vietnam veteran Bruce Cotton. “I didn’t go fight for this country so they could keep taking and keep taking and keep taking.”

Cotton said that for 100 years public lands have been under the stewardship of Inyo County’s mining and ranching communities. “We take care of this land, we have for generations and generations. I’ve got it from a reliable source that all they want is to stop mining. I’m very adamantly against it.”

“I find it really hard to believe this coalition could offer mining as a reason for this wilderness,” said Paul Allen Matthews. “The only way we can fight this is to fight it. If we don’t send letters to Feinstein she’s not going to hear the other side.”

To the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, Matthews expressed appreciation for hosting the open forum and allowing residents to participate in the discussion. “Fight the good fight, we’re behind you,” he said.

Dick Noles, executive director of AAPL, offered a new solution to the problems perceived by residents regarding the new wilderness proposals.

Noles recommended that the board and Inyo County residents write Congressman Buck McKeon, requesting that he back out of the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act.

According to Noles, McKeon and his partner on the bill, Senator Barbara Boxer, promised that, with the passage of the Wild Heritage Act, the federal government would not seek any more wilderness in Inyo County.

“The ink isn’t even dry on that, and they are back here again,” Noles said. “It’s very frustrating and it’s a battle we keep losing.”

Many residents who spoke Tuesday evening noted that there were no representatives from the California Wilderness Coalition or Feinstein’s office present at the meeting.

The last speaker, Sherry Casgrow of Keeler, said that there was a representative from the Wilderness Coalition in attendance, but that individual left the meeting without commenting.

Fifth District Supervisor Richard Cervantes said he was disappointed that no one from the coalition spoke at the meeting, but said, overall, “it was a great turnout.”

The Board of Supervisors was not scheduled to take action on the proposed wilderness designations, and plans continue the discussion with residents, the California Wilderness Coalition and Feinstein.

“There will potentially be many more meetings on this issue,” Supervisor Arcularius said.