



Eastern Sierra wilderness bill goes back to The Swamp

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By Mike Gervais
Register Staff
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The new year has come with new legislation that means another go at passing the controversial Eastern Sierra/Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act. Picking up where it left off last year, the U.S. Senate again has before it a package of public lands bills that includes three wilderness proposals to designate 700,000 acres of California's wild lands and rivers as Wilderness Areas and Wild and Scenic waterways. Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, introduced the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2009 this week. The act is similar to a bill introduced late in the last session of Congress, but, with the legislative session coming to an end, no decision was made and the legislation ultimately died.

The three "new" California provisions would protect public lands and rivers in Riverside County, the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks by designating new Wilderness areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers. The Riverside and Sequoia-Kings Canyon bills passed the House of Representatives during the last Congress, and the Eastern Sierra/San Gabriel bill was approved by a key Senate committee last fall.

The full Senate has begun consideration of the package, and is expected to continue its deliberations into next week.



The Eastern Sierra Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act is heading back to the Senate in Washington, D.C. along with two other bills. Lawmakers expect to come to a decision on the controversial bill as early as next week. File photo

Senator Barbara Boxer worked with Congressman Howard “Buck” McKeon (R-Santa Clarita) to draft the bipartisan Wild Heritage Act.

Congresswoman Mary Bono Mack (R-Palm Springs) and Congressmen Jim Costa (D-Fresno) and Devin Nunes (R-Visalia) worked on the other bills and Senator Dianne Feinstein have cosponsored all three proposals.

Despite the bipartisan effort, and wide-sweeping, vocal support of the wilderness designations from the Mono County Board of Supervisors and special-interest groups such as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Inyo, Wilderness Society and many others, residents in Inyo County, for the most part, continue to outwardly oppose the aspects of the bill that would limit certain recreational opportunities.

The local non-profit group Advocates for Access to Public Lands (AAPL) “continues to oppose this because of the inappropriate wilderness contained in the bill,” AAPL President Greg Weirick said. “There is some good wilderness in the bill, but a large portion of it is unacceptable.”

Members of AAPL, as well as the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, have contended that much of the Wild Heritage Act, as it pertains to Inyo County, covers areas that do not meet the original 1964 definition of “wilderness” because they have been developed or otherwise tainted by human use.

In an effort to stop the bill, or prompt a revision Inyo County residents could support, the Board of Supervisors has sent several letters to Boxer, McKeon and Feinstein.

“My feelings about this haven’t changed,” said newly elected board chairperson Beverly Brown. “I will continue to oppose this because of the negative effect on our community, our way of life and our economy.”

Brown said that she receives daily e-mails, from across the nation, expressing opposition to the Wild Heritage Act.

“I hope it gets rejected,” Brown said. “With everything going on in the U.S., is this really something we need to focus on?”

Despite opposition to the Wild Heritage Act locally, many throughout the state have come out in support of the bill, citing its bipartisan origins and goal of conservation.

“Hundreds of organizations, community groups, businesses and elected officials have endorsed these bills,” said Sam Goldman of the California Wild Heritage Campaign, a

coalition of more than 500 businesses and organizations working to ensure the permanent protection of California's wild public lands and rivers. "This broad showing of support is a testament to Californian's enthusiasm for protecting our wild heritage for future generations."

"The sponsors of these bills, along with Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), have been great champions for wilderness protection in our state," said Ryan Henson, policy director for the California Wilderness Coalition. "We appreciate their steadfast effort to pass these important wilderness bills this Congress, ensuring a lasting legacy for the many people who use and enjoy these wild lands."

Jon Owen, deputy campaigns director for Campaign for America's Wilderness, said, "This is a bipartisan success story. Our elected officials reached across the partisan divide, found common ground and protected it."

The Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act aims to preserve nearly 450,000 acres of proposed wilderness and four potential Wild and Scenic rivers totaling 73 miles near Santa Clarita and in the Eastern Sierra, including the White Mountains. The other bills included in the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act are the California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act and the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Wilderness Act.

If passed, the California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act will protect approximately 190,000 acres of ecologically sensitive land in Riverside County as wilderness, including parts of Joshua Tree National Park, and four wild and scenic rivers totaling 31 miles. Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Wilderness Act of 2008 aims to preserve close to 70,000 acres of wilderness, including the new John Krebs Wilderness, named for the former congressman and conservationist who worked to protect these lands in the Mineral King Valley.