

Bipartisan support for wilderness bill

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U.S. Congressman Buck McKeon shares details of his wilderness legislation during a press conference in Bishop on May 23.
Photo by Ken Koerner

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Under bipartisan legislation recently introduced in both bodies of the U.S. Congress, more than 400,000 acres of wilderness in Inyo and Mono Counties and 45 miles of the Owens River Headwaters and Death Valley's Amargosa River could have their wild heritage preserved.

In addition, there could also be another 40,000-plus acres of wilderness and several more miles of "wild and scenic river" protected in the northern San Gabriel Mountains in the Santa Clarita and the Antelope Valleys of Southern California.

During a press conference held Friday afternoon at the Eastern Sierra Regional Airport in Bishop, 25th District U.S. Congressman Buck McKeon announced the introduction of his House Resolution No. 6156 bill, written to provide this conservation protection.

"I am pleased that after years of working with local leaders, wilderness activists and recreational enthusiasts, we finally have a practical solution to preserving the wild heritage of the 25th Congressional District," McKeon said. "I also want to thank Senator (Barbara) Boxer for playing such a critical role in crafting legislation that meets the needs of all the key stakeholders. With this legislation, we are increasing economic development by preserving land treasured by many and enhancing recreational opportunities in the area."

Addressing the companion legislation that Boxer has introduced in the U.S. Senate, McKeon acknowledged that their sometimes "divergent" political perspectives did not impede their ability to forge a successful alliance to further this shared agenda.

"Working with Senator Boxer on this has really been encouraging. I feel that together we've achieved more than either of us may have initially anticipated would be possible," McKeon said. "Barbara really wants to make sure that this bill will move forward and that we can accomplish this important goal for our constituents – and all those that visit this remarkable area."

For her part, Senator Boxer's office has released a statement mirroring her sense that a genuine consensus has guided this legislative effort.

"I am thrilled that Congressman Buck McKeon and I, together with countless local officials and residents, were able to forge a bipartisan compromise to protect these truly spectacular lands," Boxer stated. "From the majestic High Sierra to the stunning White Mountains and their ancient Bristlecone Pine forests, to the beautiful northern San Gabriel Mountains, Californians will be able to enjoy this striking beauty forever. We will continue to work together to make sure that this natural legacy can be left to our grandchildren and their grandchildren."

Boxer and McKeon's Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act legislation will, if enacted, give wilderness designations – the highest level of protection and conservation for federal lands – to a total of 472,803 acres of public federal lands and 52 miles of wild and scenic rivers.

The tracts of public lands to be provided protection under the proposed legislation includes, according to an informational packet handed out by the California Wild Heritage Campaign:

- **White Mountain Wilderness:** America's largest and highest desert mountain range, which contains the largest expanse of alpine tundra in western North America, the highest peak in the Great Basin, the second largest "unprotected roadless area" in the lower 48 states and is home to world's oldest living trees, the ancient Bristlecone Pines.
- **Hoover Wilderness Additions:** The northern Hoover Additions ("west" and "east") includes 12 miles of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail and the headwaters of the West Walker River. The southern portion, mostly high plateaus rising above the west shore of Mono Lake, is home to a reintroduced population of the endangered Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep.
- **Granite Mountain Wilderness:** East of Mono Lake, Granite Mountain is a varied landscape that contains sage grouse, deer migration corridors, raptor nesting sites and wild horses.
- **Owens River Headwaters Wilderness:** More than 100 seeps and springs form the headwaters of the Owens River, just east of the San Joaquin ridge between Mammoth and June Lakes. Considered the most important Eastern Sierra river system, the area includes Glass Creek Meadow and the region's largest old growth red fir forest.
- **John Muir Wilderness Additions:** The legislation would move the current wilderness boundary down from the crest to include more of the steep Eastern Sierra scarp.
- **Pleasant View Ridge Wilderness:** This area is located south of Palmdale/Lancaster on the north slope of

the San Gabriel Mountains and includes 8,200-foot Mt. Williamson and the headwaters of Little Rock Creek.

- Magic Mountain Wilderness Noted as a "scenic backdrop to the Santa Clarita Valley, Magic Mountain's chaparral-covered hillsides and live oak canyons drain into the Santa Clara River."
- Amargosa Wild & Scenic River: The only river flowing into Death Valley, the Amargosa supports more than 280 bird species, including several which are identified as threatened or endangered.
- Owens Headwaters Wild & Scenic Rivers: The Owens River headwaters include Glass Creek, Deadman Creek and Big Springs, supporting one of America's most noted and popular trout fisheries.
- Piru Creek Wild & Scenic River: Located northwest of Castaic, Piru Creek is one of the few year-round catch and release trout fishing streams in southern California.

According to information provided by both McKeon and Boxer, their bills, drafted to cover the above areas, have resulted from a unique collaborative effort based upon input from local community leaders, leading conservation groups, sportsmen, public lands access advocates and business owners.

Representative McKeon stated that he has been working to preserve and enhance recreational opportunities in the Eastern Sierra with these stakeholders since his election to office in 2001. With this bipartisan effort moving on parallel tracks in both bodies of Congress, he anticipates that such efforts will now be rewarded.

"I think she (Sen. Boxer) can definitely get this done (passage of her bill in the U.S. Senate) over there," McKeon said, "and I think we can certainly get it done in the House."

McKeon also noted his confidence that the joint effort will culminate in gaining support from the White House.

"I think that President Bush will clearly see the value in this shared bill for our District," said McKeon, "and I absolutely believe I will gain his support in signing this well-designed legislation."

McKeon, noting his recent successful interaction with the President, said, "I've been in the Oval Office on a couple of recent occasions, to witness President Bush signing bills into law that I've worked on just as hard – and for which I felt equally committed to their value."

Additional reporting on the proposed legislation will appear in the Thursday, May 29 Inyo Register.