

July 21, 2008**Editorial**

Two Million Acres of Wilderness

Congress has an opportunity to add significantly to the nation's store of protected wilderness a million new acres at a minimum, and perhaps twice that if everything falls into place. But it must move quickly. This is an election year, with many other distractions, including an economic crisis and soaring fuel prices, and there is not a lot of time left to pass legislation.

So far, this Congress has passed one wilderness bill setting aside more than 100,000 acres of clear streams, alpine peaks and old-growth forests in Washington State. An additional 900,000 acres of potential wilderness in five states including 250,000 acres in Colorado's Rocky Mountains would be protected in a bill introduced in the Senate last month by Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico.

There are also a dozen other measures at various stages in the legislative process including several that would protect large areas in California and these could conceivably push the total to two million.

Wilderness areas are more strictly protected than any other federal lands, including the national parks. Motorized transport and commerce are forbidden, hiking and fishing allowed. The wilderness system now covers about 107 million acres nationwide, about half of it in Alaska, or about 4.8 percent of the nation's land mass.

The Bush administration has mainly regarded public lands as a commercial asset, exploiting

them for resources like natural gas. Gale Norton, the administration's first interior secretary, actually removed protections the Clinton administration had provisionally given to 2.6 million acres in Utah, while announcing that she had no interest in proposing any new wilderness lands.

Still, the administration has not discouraged Congress from making its own proposals, and President Bush hoping to improve his slim conservation credentials has indicated that he will sign bills that reach his desk. It is now up to Congress to get them there.

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