

The Seattle Times

Wednesday, April 30, 2008 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Congress finally OKs Wild Sky Wilderness

By Warren Cornwall
Seattle Times environment reporter

Washington is on the verge of getting its first new wilderness area in more than two decades, 106,000 acres of forest in the Cascade Mountains, just a short drive from Seattle.

With a House vote Tuesday evening, Congress sent the long-awaited and long-debated Wild Sky Wilderness plan to President Bush, who is expected to sign it.

But when hikers return this summer to the mountains above Skykomish and Index, they probably won't notice much change.

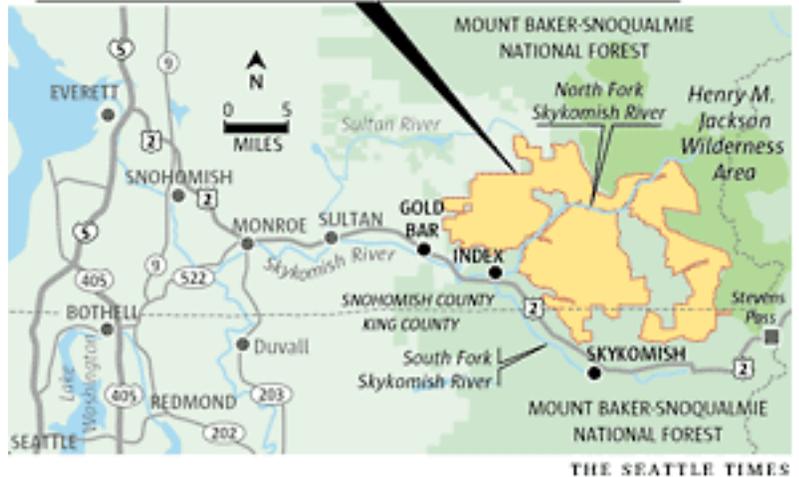
And that's exactly the point for Tom Uniack, who has spent the past five years lobbying to create Wild Sky.

"Change will happen," said Uniack, conservation director of the Washington Wilderness Coalition.

"So if you want to keep something the same, you have to do something about it."

Wild Sky Wilderness

Congress passed and President Bush is expected to sign legislation to protect more than 100,000 acres of federal forestland in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.



STEVEN FEY PHOTOGRAPHY
West Cady Ridge is part of what will be the Wild Sky Wilderness in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

The new wilderness designation would shield the vast area inside the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest from the kind of changes that environmentalists fear most: logging, mining, and even cars and off-road vehicles. The federal Wilderness Act bars virtually all motors. You can't even fire up a chain saw.

The land that would wind up inside the Wild Sky boundaries isn't a top hiking destination. Still, some advocates hope the new designation will mean more visitors — and federal money to improve trails.

"It really opens doors," said Jonathan Guzzo, advocacy director for the Washington Trails Association, a hiking advocacy group. "When we're talking to our [congressional] delegation, when we're talking to members from other states, we can talk about the level of commitment to this area."

The legislation will direct the Forest Service to come up with a trail plan for the wilderness and surrounding land.

What's outside the proposed wilderness, meanwhile, is in some ways as important as what was kept in. With an eye toward winning over potential opponents, the boundary was drawn to leave out 4,000 acres in an area popular with snowmobilers, and the trail to Barclay Lake, a route heavily used by Boy Scouts and other groups.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, who championed Wild Sky, said it was "an example of wilderness done the right way," with support from local groups and elected officials. The Senate OK'd the designation April 10.

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Lake Stevens, who represents the area, called the House's 291-117 passage of Wild Sky, which was part of a large package of proposals concerning public lands nationwide, the "end of a long hike."

"There have been many twists and turns along the way, and let me tell you it's a beautiful view from here," Larsen said.

A few roads will be cut short by the new designation. Roughly the last mile of the Rapid River road, a place where some people drive for picnics, would be closed, said Barbara Busse, district ranger for the Forest Service's Skykomish District, which manages the land.

"We're going to have to figure out some way to keep traffic off of it," she said.

Creation of the wilderness had been blocked in the House for years by Congressman Richard Pombo, a

powerful California Republican who said some of the land wasn't pristine enough to warrant wilderness protection. But Pombo was unseated in 2006 as Democrats regained a majority in the House, and Wild Sky was revived.

But with the political hurdles almost cleared, Wild Sky faces another, more pragmatic barrier: Several roads remain damaged by winter storms. In fact, the main road to the wilderness, along the North Fork Skykomish River north of Index, is closed before it reaches the popular Troublesome Creek campground.

It'll be years before that road is fully repaired, Busse said.

In addition, the hike to a lookout on Evergreen Mountain has grown miles longer because part of a road washed out. The Forest Service hasn't decided what to do with that road.

Warren Cornwall: 206-464-2311 or wcornwall@seattletimes.com. Information from The Associated Press was included in this report.

Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company