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## One down, three to go

HCN Online - April 30, 2008 *by Evelyn Schlatter*

Four Western states could see big chunks of new wilderness -- roughly three-quarters of a million acres -- thanks to a flurry of wilderness legislation. Three bills are now wending their way through Congress, and a fourth, designating the Washington State Wild Sky Wilderness, awaits President Bush's expected signature.

Many Northwesterners are enthusiastic: Idaho is getting its first new wilderness in nearly 30 years, and this is Washington state's first new wilderness area in two decades. Oregon's effort, while small in acreage, has broad support. The Utah proposal, however, has drawn some opposition from environmental groups.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., primary sponsor of the Wild Sky Wilderness Bill, has guided it through the legislative process four times over the past nine years. The bill finally passed as part of a less-controversial package of public lands bills. Wild Sky designates 106,000 acres in the Cascade Mountains near Seattle as wilderness and calls for a plan to develop hiking trails. The bill bans motorized vehicles, but in the spirit of compromise, the boundary was drawn to ensure that 4,000 acres just outside the wilderness area can still be used by off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

In western Oregon, a bill just passed by the House would encompass about 13,700 acres of new coastal wilderness and designate 11 miles of the Elk River as wild and scenic. The Elk River shelters runs of salmon, steelhead and trout.

The Owyhee Public Land Management Act of 2008 would designate 517,000 acres as wilderness and 315 miles of rivers as wild and scenic in southwestern Idaho. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, is sponsoring the bill, which made it smoothly through its first major Senate committee hearing last week.

The bill grew out of an effort launched seven years ago by the Owyhee County Commissioners to resolve public-lands issues, says Craig Gehrke, Idaho representative for The Wilderness Society. President Clinton spoke of the need for an Owyhee National Monument, but did not include it in his final monument designations. Protection for the Owyhee seemed inevitable, Gehrke says, so the county commissioners figured, "Why not do it ourselves?"

The Owyhee County commissioners collaborated with environmental, conservation, ranching and outdoor recreation groups, including the Idaho Conservation Society, the Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association and the Owyhee Cattlemen's Association. The effort involved a lot of compromise, says John Robison of the Idaho Conservation League, but as a result, "There are more people happy here than unhappy." One of the bill's provisions releases nearly 200,000 acres of wilderness study areas back to multiple-

use management, which pleases off-road enthusiasts and other outdoor recreationists.

Ranchers also get something from the bill. They can sell or trade inholdings within proposed wilderness areas for public lands closer to their home cattle operations or other private lands.

But in Utah, the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act hasn't enjoyed the same level of support. Last week, Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, one of the bill's sponsors, introduced the latest version of the bill (it died in committee in 2006). The revised bill is backed by some environmental and conservation groups, but not all. It would designate about 264,000 acres of wilderness – 124,000 in Zion National Park and 140,000 in other areas, along with 166 miles of wild and scenic rivers. Other changes from the 2006 version include the removal of utility-corridor designations, including the Lake Powell pipeline, and the development of a comprehensive travel plan, including the High Desert OHV Trail, a nod to off-roaders.

“We're not happy about the bill,” says Scott Groene, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. “There are positive things in here for the park (Zion), but as it stands, it would not benefit wilderness.” Groene is worried about the increased ORV trails included in the bill's transportation plan. He's also concerned about how the money from public-land sales would be divvied up under the bill.

The bill limits BLM land sales to just over 9,000 acres. Money from those sales would be divided as follows: 5 percent to schools, 10 percent to Washington County, and 85 percent to local conservation efforts. Groene fears that the money might end up in the hands of private

entities, like land developers. But Dave Livermore, Utah state director of The Nature Conservancy, which supports the bill, says that the funds from land sales are earmarked for conservation efforts and will stay local.

The Senate is considering its own version of Oregon's Copper Salmon wilderness proposal. The Owyhee bill could pass later this year, given the warm reception in its first hearing, its bipartisan support, and a Democratic Congress. The Washington County bill awaits its first hearing.

*The author is an intern for High Country News.*

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