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Wilderness plan hits some snags

Opposition gains forum at House hearing, with passage not assured.

By David Whitney -- Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON - Legislation to protect as wilderness about 300,000 acres of federal land along the North Coast, described as some of the most spectacular public lands in the country, got a long-promised hearing Thursday in the House.

But the hearing before the House Resources Committee was dominated by opponents from Del Norte County, where less than 15 percent of the new wilderness areas would be created, raising questions about whether the bill sponsored by Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, will gain much traction in the House.

Four years in the making, the legislation would put wilderness boundaries around 119,234 acres of lands owned by the Bureau of Land Management and 177,176 acres owned by the U.S. Forest Service. Mechanized public access would be prohibited.

The most spectacular addition would be 42,585 acres in the King Range National Conservation Area, which the BLM said would become the "crown jewel" of its wilderness system. The King Range wilderness would include 26 miles of coastline that, except for a handful of privately owned parcels, is the longest undeveloped coastline remaining in the continental United States.

Other additions would be the 30,870-acre proposed Cache Creek wilderness area in Lake County, a popular whitewater rafting area; a 50,000-acre expansion of the Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness; 48,754 acres of additions to the Siskiyou National Forest wilderness; and 53,887 acres in the proposed Yuki Wilderness Area of the Mendocino National Forest.

The wilderness legislation is the product of an intense series of negotiations by Thompson and the legislation's two Senate sponsors, California Democrats Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. Together they meticulously worked out acceptable wilderness boundaries with local logging companies, recreation groups, business and environmental leaders and Indian tribes.

The legislation has been praised in the Senate as an example of cooperation and compromise, and Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., chairman of the forests subcommittee that conducted Thursday's hearing, echoed those accolades.

But in the House, particularly in the Resources Committee that by tradition has a large contingent of private-property advocates among its Republican majority, any wilderness addition can be a fight.

State Sen. Sam Aanestad, R-Grass Valley, whose sprawling district includes Del Norte County, set out to capitalize on that schism in his appearance Thursday.

"Seventy-five percent of Del Norte County is already owned by the government," he said, blaming that fact for the high poverty rate. "The people of that county want to know: When is enough enough?"

Other critics charged that wilderness additions will make it harder to manage the lands for forest fires and will close off trails used by mountain bikers and off-road vehicle enthusiasts. The Forest Service raised concerns that wilderness status could make fire management more expensive, and it objected to the inclusion of a few areas where logging could occur under a Pacific Northwest plan adopted after the spotted owl controversy of more than a decade ago.

But for each of these charges, there were counter-arguments.

The BLM and Forest Service witnesses said they knew of no legal roads or trails that would be closed. And unlike most other wilderness areas in the country, the new additions in Thompson's bill would specifically permit trucks and mechanized equipment to be used not just to fight wildfires, but also to clear away brush and overgrowth so that fire would be less likely to occur.

"There have been 17 modifications to an earlier version of the bill for the purposes of fire management alone," said Mendocino County Supervisor Jim Wattenburger.

The way wilderness is treated in the Thompson bill is so unusual that Walden said it made him wonder, "Is it really a wilderness area?"

After the hearing, Thompson said he has no clue whether Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, chairman of the House Resources Committee, will let his bill come to a vote.

"If it doesn't, it's not because we haven't worked real hard," Thompson said. "It becomes a political issue."

Pombo could not be reached for comment.

But Brian Kennedy, Pombo's committee spokesman, said the chairman felt the hearing "made good" on his promise to Thompson to hold a hearing on the measure, but where it goes from there is uncertain.

"He has not decided whether it will rise to the full committee," Kennedy said.

The Boxer-Feinstein version passed the Senate last year and is ready to be taken up again by the chamber, although nothing is scheduled.

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