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LARRY CRAIG

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NEWS RELEASE

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Protecting Our Public Lands **by Senator Larry Craig**

The leaves are rapidly falling from the trees as the year draws to an end. So it is with the 110th Congress. My colleagues and I will soon meet for what will likely be the final time.

There is much talk of working on a second economic stimulus package, but it remains unclear whether there is enough support for any such proposal. There is also a conglomeration of nearly 150 public lands bills referred to as the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2008, which could come to the floor. That package is particularly of interest since it includes a significant portion of legislation I have worked to improve through my service on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

One such bill provides compensation to ranchers for livestock lost to wolves. I have strongly opposed the Department of Interior's decision to introduce wolves into Idaho from the inception, but now that wolves are in our State we must find a reasonable way to make it work. This legislation accomplishes this task by requiring the federal government, which forced wolves on Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, to aid ranchers in both protecting their livestock and recovering any losses caused by wolves.

Another important provision provides greater protection against wildfires. The proposed bill accomplishes this by restoring the health of our nation's forests, through the selective thinning of overcrowded forests, as well as by the removal of dense undergrowth that transforms into hazardous fuel in the dry, summer months. Having been home to the nation's largest wildfire just a year ago, Idaho stands to gain significant new protection through this legislation.

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The Snake River Headwaters Legacy Act of 2007, which would apply wild and scenic designation to a portion of the Snake River below Jackson Lake Dam in Wyoming, is also included in the Act. I raised some serious concerns about this legislation earlier this year when I saw the unintended consequences it could have on our State's water users, since the waters flow through Wyoming but ultimately belong to Idaho. Over the ensuing months I worked with the bill's sponsor, the Idaho Water Users Association and others to resolve this concern and ensure that our water interests were protected.

A final bill I hope to have included in the omnibus preserves our Second Amendment rights on federal lands. As it is now, those legally allowed to carry guns can do so on Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service lands, but not on those under the jurisdiction of the National Park and U.S. Fish and Wildlife services. The new legislation would correct the conflicting regulations by allowing individuals not prohibited from having firearms, to carry them on federal lands if the State where the lands are located has comparable rules for its own State parks.

During my nearly three decades of service in the U.S. Congress, I have worked to establish federal policies that build the West while protecting its precious natural resources and way of life. I don't know if the measures described above will become law this year, but one thing I do know: Public lands issues have been important for Idaho, and they will continue to be so – into the next Congress and beyond.