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Blumenauer, Walden foresee Mount Hood plan passage

Wilderness - The House bill would protect 77,500 acres from logging and development

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WASHINGTON -- After spending three years of meticulous planning to expand wilderness protections around Mount Hood, Reps. Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer said Wednesday that prospects are good for passing the bill through Congress this year.

"I think we've vetted nearly every issue out there that needed to be vetted and given the public an opportunity to weigh in," Walden, a Republican, said after a House panel heard testimony on the measure. "If we do our work right, we can move quickly."

Blumenauer, a Democrat, said he is encouraged, despite election-year pressures that could derail the bill.

The Mount Hood Stewardship Legacy Act would put 77,500 acres off limits to logging and development. The bill has won support from a range of stakeholders, including environmental advocates, tribes and orchard owners.

Walden and Blumenauer heard testimony from six Oregonians on Wednesday. All said they support adding wilderness acreage as part of a broader plan to balance growing demands for recreation and development on Mount Hood, Oregon's iconic peak.

The only hint of opposition came from Frank Backus, chief forester for SDS Lumber Co. Backus said his company and other members of the American Forest Resource Council oppose protecting acreage designated for harvest under the Northwest Forest Plan.

"In the long term, the national forests again need to become productive," Backus told Walden, who heads the forestry subcommittee of Resources.

Notably, committee members who typically oppose expanding wilderness protections were absent. And Walden said he had won support from the committee's chairman, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., who normally is cautious about limiting use of public lands.

Walden said a key to success so far has been the bill's comprehensive approach. While it puts some land off limits, its 52 pages also contain provisions for fire prevention, watershed protection and traffic management.

"This is not just somebody's wilderness bill," Walden said. "This is a much bigger look at the mountain."

Walden said his goal is to win committee approval in May and then present the bill for quick floor passage under a procedure known as suspension of the rules. At the same time, he and Blumenauer have been working with Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Gordon Smith to craft a strategy for final passage.

Neither Wyden, a Democrat, nor Smith, a Republican, has committed to support the House bill. But aides said the two have been discussing the possibility of introducing their own measure.

A Wyden-Smith plan could go farther. In the last Congress, Wyden proposed expanding Mount Hood wilderness by as much as 200,000 acres. Although Smith has not offered his own plan, an aide said he likely would try to add more than the acreage proposed by Walden and Blumenauer.

"He thinks the House bill is a very good one," said Chris Matthews, Smith's spokesman. "But he wants to see if there is some acreage that can be added to expand the wilderness a little bit more."

It's unclear, however, whether Wyden and Smith will be able to move as quickly as their counterparts in the House.

"We would prefer to get it done this Congress," said Josh Kardon, Wyden's chief of staff, "but the most important thing is to do it right."

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