



The Oregonian

Lawmakers reintroduce Mt. Hood wilderness bill

Forest - Sens. Ron Wyden and Gordon Smith hope a new Congress will get different results

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U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Gordon Smith, R-Ore., on Thursday reintroduced a bill to protect 128,600 acres of Mount Hood forestland, continuing a significant shift in how Oregonians use the national forest.

Once one of the most prolific timber-producing forests in the nation, it increasingly serves as an urban forest, a playground to the region's millions of residents.

The proposed new wilderness areas would close about 12 percent of Mount Hood National Forest to logging or road building, in addition to about 19 percent of the forest that is already wilderness areas.

The bill would add 34,545 acres to national recreation areas within the forest. The recreation areas would allow limited logging or road building but only under tightly constrained circumstances.

In addition, the "Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act of 2007" would add protection under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to 80 miles of rivers.

"This is more than a bipartisan effort, this is a community effort involving thousands of Oregonians who care about the preservation of our most-cherished lands," Wyden said. "It has been more than 200 years since Lewis and Clark first laid eyes on Mount Hood. Today is an important step in preserving what they saw then for all future generations."

A smaller version of the wilderness bill that passed the House last year would have brought in 77,000 acres of new wilderness in the national forest. That bill died, as did a similar Senate effort by Wyden and Smith. That version included about 128,000 acres of wilderness.

Steve Pedery, conservation director for Oregon Wild, praised the bill introduced Thursday.

"One hundred years from now, people are going to look back and thank us for the things we did set aside," Pedery said. "It's not as large a bill as we'd like . . . but this is a good piece of legislation."

With Democratic control of Congress, the bill could move quickly through both houses. But the Bush administration has said it is concerned about the amount of acreage and the inclusion of one of three land exchanges in the bill.

The land exchange in question calls for the U.S. Forest Service to swap property adjacent to Government Camp for land on the northeast flank of the mountain, controlled by the owners of the Mt. Hood Meadows ski area.

The deal was the result of an unusual agreement between some residents of the Hood River Valley and other interest groups that want no more development on the northeastern flank and Mt. Hood Meadows, which is looking for a place to build homes.

Appraisals paid for by Mt. Hood Meadows were included in the House bill last year, but they were criticized

by the Government Accountability Office as not meeting accepted appraisal standards that are meant to ensure a fair trade. The GAO is the investigative arm of Congress.

Undersecretary of Agriculture Mark Rey said last week that the land exchange remains problematic. The swap doesn't meet the needs of the public, he said, and would not be one the government would choose to do outside the legislation.

The federal government is allowed by law to exchange federal land for private land in some cases and has strict rules governing how that is done.

Rey said the land the government would receive in the exchange, "would not be substantially beneficial to the American public."

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