

Wednesday, November 24, 2010

Lame duck Congress to vote on omnibus bill

by Andy Rieber - WLJ Correspondent

The current lame duck session of the 111th Congress may be preparing to vote on an omnibus public lands bill that packages together a raft of public lands proposals under one piece of legislation. The bill, proposed by Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee (ENRC), is thought to consist of over 60 individual public lands proposals, including approximately 20 new wilderness designations in 13 states. The total proposed new wilderness in the bill is rumored to exceed 2 million acres.

Last year, Congress passed a similar bill, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, which designated another 2 million acres of wilderness in nine states, as well as adding thousands of miles to the Wild and Scenic River system, among other items. President Obama signed the 2009 legislation into law March 30, 2010.

The complete slate of wilderness proposals to be included in the 2010 bill has not yet been disclosed. According to a report in the *New York Times*, the omnibus bill will only include legislation that has cleared ENRC, though at this time, it is uncertain exactly which bills have passed committee and which have not. Among other places, the omnibus bill could potentially create wilderness in Arizona's Tumacacori Highlands (84,000 acres), in California's Fort Irwin, Cady, and Soda Mountain areas (346,000 acres), Colorado's San Juan Mountains (33,000 acres), and on Oregon's lower John Day River (16,000 acres). It could also designate nearly 260,000 acres of new wilderness and a 110,000 National Conservation Area in New Mexico's Organ / Dona Ana Mountains. Other states with pending wilderness legislation include Idaho, Michigan, Montana, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia.

If passed, the combined cost of the bill is said to be over \$100 million dollars.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-NV, supported the 2009 omnibus bill and is expected to follow suit on a 2010 bill. The question is whether the bill will actually make it to the floor with so many pressing budget issues demanding attention. If it does not get voted on now, its chances for success next year in the new congress are slim. Rep. Doc Hastings, R-WA, will then likely chair the House Natural Resource Committee, and Rep. Rob Bishop, R-UT, is anticipated to head the National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee. Both representatives have voiced their dislike of omnibus bills, claiming they are a means of smuggling in bad legislation by bundling it with good legislation.

The 2010 Omnibus Bill has received strong support from environmental groups who are eager for the legislation to pass before a more conservative Congress convenes next year. In particular, the Wilderness Society and Campaign for America's Wilderness, affiliated with the Pew Environmental Group, have been vocal advocates.

The Wilderness Society, in collaboration with 173 other special interest groups, recently sent a letter to House and Senate leaders urging them to pass the legislation during the year-end session. The Wilderness Society website explained that "The suite of bills would establish new parks, monuments, wilderness, battlefields and heritage areas; support water supply and

conservation projects and protect key river segments; facilitate necessary land exchanges and conveyances; and improve the management of America's public lands."

According to *National Parks Traveler*, the Wilderness Society's National Wilderness Campaign Associate Director Paul Spitler stated that the proposals to designate wilderness, monuments and parks "provide important benefits to communities across the country by facilitating economic development and creating jobs, protecting key American natural and historic resources and providing opportunities for all Americans to enjoy the peace and quiet of nature." Campaign for America's Wilderness Director Mike Matz encouraged members of Congress in a press release to push the bill through.

"[W]e call on Congress to wrap the many wilderness bills now pending into one package, pass it as an omnibus measure and send it to the president for his signature. Nearly 20 bipartisan wilderness bills are awaiting action. Together, they would protect nearly two million additional acres of wild land, which is the amount we lose in open space each year.

"These amazing landscapes, with names like Devil's Staircase and Cathedral Rock in Oregon, New Mexico's Organ Mountains, the Boulder-White Clouds in Idaho, California's Pinnacles and Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes, are America's common ground. Across the country, people of all backgrounds—teachers, hunters and anglers, small business owners, conservationists, ranchers and outdoor recreationists—have worked in their communities to build support for protecting these much-loved places for their children and grandchildren to use and enjoy."

Natural resource users and recreationists alike surely can agree that maintaining the health of public lands for the future is essential. Yet it is far from clear whether the measure enjoys the broad support Matz suggests.

A letter sent last week to Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and signed by 16 individual livestock groups, including the Public Lands Council, objected to the legislation, stating, "We cannot support an omnibus lands bill which would undoubtedly restrict millions of acres of federal land by creating new land designations such as wilderness areas and National Conservation Areas across the West."

The letter encouraged Salazar to support continued natural resource use on public lands and to promote open and inclusive public input on land designations.

Further, the letter objected to the packaging of so many bills in one "yes-or-no" vote, suggesting that the bills require piecemeal examination on their individual merits.

"While we may not know how many bills would be included in an omnibus measure, this we know with certainty: that every public land bill is unique and deserves thoughtful congressional deliberation and local input." — **Andy Rieber, WLJ Correspondent**