

Wilderness bill debated

Opposing sides pack hearing on legislation

BY TODD G. DICKSON

Groups of people with concerns about the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, which is aimed at protecting 359,000 acres of federal land in Doña Ana County, got what they asked for Monday, Feb. 15 – a local hearing.

An estimated 700 residents – almost equally split between supporters and opponents of the federal legislation – filled the Corbett Center Ballrooms at New Mexico State University for the local hearing chaired by the bill's sponsors, U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

Bingaman acknowledged there are diverse views on how much protection should be written into law, but he said he feels there is “broad community support” for providing more permanent protection for natural areas in Doña Ana County.

The bill seeks to establish 259,000 acres of wilderness and 100,000 acres of National Conservation Area (NCA). The legislation would also release 16,350 acres that are Wilderness Study Areas, a temporary wilderness designation that currently restricts uses.

Udall said he hoped testimony at the hearing would help refine the legislation to bring it closer to a consensus proposal.

The hearing consisted of testimony from three panels. The first was comprised of representatives from local governments – City of Las Cruces, Doña Ana County and Mesilla – who testified on their support for the legislation.

“We believe that the will of the people has been heard,” said County Commissioner Leticia Duarte-Benavidez.

Las Cruces Mayor Pro Tem Sharon Thomas said city growth planning for the next 40 years does not require more land, which she said is limited by access to utilities and water.

Thomas said she believes the proposal for areas to be protected strikes “an appropriate balance.”

Mesilla Mayor Michael Cadena also cited the legislation's compromises. Wilderness areas in the bill amount to 48,900 acres fewer than what was originally recommended in what is called “The Citizens Proposal” and adds 32,750 acres that would fall under a NCA classification, which is considered less restrictive than wilderness.

Gary Esslinger, manager of Elephant Butte Irrigation District, said he is concerned that wilderness designations along mountain ranges could limit storm water control efforts in case of flooding.

“Flood control is not a static process,” said

Esslinger, who added that climate change is making flood control more difficult.

John Hummer, speaking for the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, said the Chamber's main concern is the proposed wilderness area near the U.S.-Mexico border – 143,450 acres in the Potrillo Mountains.

If the bill is passed, it would also release 16,350 acres now held as a Wilderness Study Area directly along the southern U.S.-Mexico border to provide law enforcement easier access.

Hummer said that buffer isn't adequate, and those who traffic humans and drugs see wilderness areas as places they can easily cross. The Chamber's position is to have the Potrillos be designated as NCA instead, which would allow greater flexibility for Border Patrol. He said the Chamber is not asking for the areas to be open to development. Nor should they provide an opportunity for a “new flow of illegal activity,” he said. “So, why risk it? That's the question we're putting forth,” Hummer said.

Tom Cooper, a rancher and member of the People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, said federal rules for grazing on wilderness are based on “high country” ranching, which can handle infrequent access. But desert ranching requires daily care and access, he said. Also, overlapping ranching operations in designated areas would become a “bureaucratic nightmare,” Cooper said.

Frank DuBois, a former state agriculture department secretary, said he believes the wilderness “gold standard” doesn't fit with the modern West, in which access to public lands provides many uses.

“A new land use designation is needed that provides protection with public access,” he said.

U.S. Rep. Harry Teague, who also attended the hearing, said he shared some of the concerns voiced about the legislation.

Teague said he wanted to know how the proposal would bring economic benefits and affect hunting and fishing, but acknowledged that the Organ Mountains and open spaces help define the area's character.

“In many ways, the Organs and the open spaces of Doña Ana County are the goose that lays the golden economic egg,” Teague said. “I think we'd better tend carefully to that goose.”

Jim Bates, who is active in many wildlife groups, said his involvement with the process has led him to support the legislation because of all the compromises made so far. Bates said he knows not every hunter and sportsman is on board, but he feels that the negotiations have been held in good faith and the concerns are not defined enough to derail the legislation.

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In 2009, the Chamber set a goal of \$120,000 and raised more than \$150,000 with the 21 teams from the Chamber membership. Sixty percent of the 111 volunteers from last year produced for the campaign, and Dutton said at least 75 percent of those producers are returning for the 2010 campaign.

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Cowboy

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