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Jerry G. Schickedanz: The true consequences of the wilderness bill

By Jerry G. Schickedanz / For the Sun-News

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I am chairman of People for Preserving our Western Heritage. I have advanced degrees in Range Management and 35 years of experience on public lands issues.

The principal advisor to our group is a former legislative assistant to a U.S. senator and deputy secretary of Interior and has 35 years of experience in public-lands issues.

Another advisor and supporter has 34 years of experience with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), including five years in the Las Cruces office, and retired as the Lead Range Management Specialist for New Mexico BLM.

So, while we appreciate your lecture on grazing and wilderness (Sun-News editorial Sept. 26), I believe we have a wealth of our own knowledge and hands-on experience.

I continue to be amazed how the paper has once again portrayed the issue as "ranchers oppose wilderness." Our coalition represents over 800 different businesses and organizations. There is a broad array of concerns and opposition to this proposal which you failed to mention.

Some of our members are campers. They realize areas they have visited up to now will be off limits if designated as wilderness.

There will be no motorized vehicles in wilderness, so when the campers pull their trailer up to the exterior boundary, they will no longer be able to enter. Developed camping facilities are not allowed in wilderness.

Some of our members are sportsmen. They realize areas they have been able to drive to and camp on will no longer be available to them unless they walk or ride a horse to carry their gear and carry their game out.

Many of the roads they currently drive on to hunt dove and quail around tanks and windmills will no longer be available inside the wilderness.

Some members simply enjoy getting out of town for a day or afternoon and driving around and viewing our public lands. Again, no vehicles are allowed in wilderness, so they will be shut out of 259,000 acres.

Our members are concerned with the illegal trafficking of humans and drugs across our southern border. They realize a wilderness designation so close to the border will totally hamstring the Border Patrol.

No vehicles and no mechanical equipment in wilderness mean no enforcement of border security on 405 square miles of public land in Southern New Mexico.

They've seen the devastating problems this situation has caused in Arizona and don't want to see that happen here.

You are correct in saying these lands deserve protection from urban sprawl and development, which is why we proposed a land-use designation that would accomplish that in just as permanent a fashion as wilderness, but still allow the public

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access to these lands. Our proposal was new, but there are other tried and true legislative designations other than wilderness that will protect these lands but not shut out campers, sportsmen, motorized day recreationists and law enforcement.

You suggest we work with the senators on grazing. We tried.

For instance, on the 100,000 acres proposed for National Conservation Areas, we requested that grazing be included in the Purposes section of the bill so that grazing would have equal standing with the 10 other uses listed. All the ranchers wanted were to be treated equally, but that request was denied.

The Cox Family, who has ranched this area for 120 years, will not be equal to "archaeology" under the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act.

It's clear this bill is designed to benefit what the government's own studies describe as the typical wilderness visitor: a white male in the upper-income bracket. This typical wilderness visitor has the time, the means and the energy to pack into or have some outfitter haul their gear from spot to spot so they can sit and contemplate the wonder of it all.

That's certainly not the demographic of Doña Ana County and perhaps explains why from 2004 to 2007, total national wilderness visits dropped by more than 28 percent.

I trust that the citizens of Doña Ana County will question the contents of the bill and seek the true consequences of passing this bill as written.

Jerry G. Schickedanz is Dean Emeritus at the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at New Mexico State University.

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