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Start with areas of agreement

By Walt Rubel Las Cruces Sun-News

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I'd be amazed if the wilderness bill introduced by Sen. Jeff Bingaman for the Organ Mountains and other areas of Do a Ana County gets through during the lame duck session.

Bingaman said last week that he hoped to roll that bill, along with several others dealing with land issues throughout the nation, into one omnibus bill. And, as chairman of the Senate's Energy and Natural Resources Committee, he should have the clout to get that accomplished.

Bingaman spokeswoman Jude MacCartin said they have some encouragement from Senate President Harry Reid that such a bill could be taken up by the Senate before time runs out. But, there are no such assurances on the House side. Beyond that, there is simply too much on the agenda, and too few days to get it all done.

Extension of the Bush tax cuts will be the top priority in the remaining days. Assuming they can negotiate a compromise on that issue, a nuclear arms treaty with the Russians; funding for unemployment benefits; the military's don't ask, don't tell policy; and the DREAM Act are among the items likely higher on the do-to list than the wilderness bill.

All legislation not passed at the close of the session dies. And, with Steve Pearce defeating Harry Teague to win his U.S. House seat back, it will be more difficult to pass a wilderness bill next year. While Teague has been ambivalent on the issue, Pearce has opposed the wilderness designation. While in

office, he worked with ranchers in the impacted areas to to

create a new, less-restrictive designation.

When I was first introduced to the wilderness debate several years ago, the issue of border security wasn't even a consideration. It was all about fixing stock tanks, mending fences and giving ranchers the access they need to maintain their operations, as well as letting ATV users and sightseers into the area.

Now, border security has become the chief concern among critics - so much so that Bingaman made changes to the bill following a field hearing in Las Cruces to give the Border Patrol greater unrestricted access. Those provisions didn't go far enough, some critics contended. But, assuming the bill is defeated, access for Border Patrol agents will remain much more restricted under the status quo.

While I consider myself a supporter of the wilderness bill, I don't think it is the only way to protect and preserve the lands under consideration. And, I worry that we will sacrifice common-sense provisions that all sides agree on - such as expanded access for Border Patrol.

I'm not sure if there will ever be a consensus on the wilderness designation. But on areas like border security, flood control and protection from development, there is widespread agreement. Maybe we should start there.

Walter Rubel has been a newsman for more than 25 years and is managing editor of the Sun-News. He can be reached at wrubel@lcsun-news.com.

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