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## Wilderness Proposal meant to ease concerns

By Diana M. Alba dalba@lcsun-news.com

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**To see maps, comparing the proposed changes to wilderness legislation in Doña Ana County, [click here](#).**

LAS CRUCES - Revisions to a proposal for creating federal wilderness in Do-a Ana County are meant to ease concerns relating to border enforcement, lawmakers said Wednesday.

U.S. Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, D-N.M., announced they plan to modify a wilderness bill they introduced last year by changing the designation of 30,000 acres in the southernmost part of the county.

They said the new proposal would classify the acreage as a restricted-use area, a new designation in which vehicle use by the general public would be banned, but law enforcement would still be able to access the land for routine patrols.

Jude McCartin, spokeswoman for Bingaman, said the change would increase the size of a buffer zone between the international border and the southernmost tip of the proposed wilderness, giving border agents "more flexibility" in their work. The initial bill included a three-mile buffer, but the restricted-use area would add another two miles to that. Either buffer would expand upon the 1/3-mile buffer that exists now under a temporary wilderness designation.

McCartin said the senators made the decision in response to concerns expressed at a February field hearing in Las Cruces about the legislation.

"Working with the Border Patrol, I believe we

have come up with a very good resolution that both enhances our border security and protects one of New Mexico's iconic landscapes," Bingaman, who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said in a statement.

Wilderness proponent Nathan Small, with the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, said the announcement "makes a good bill even better" and shows that lawmakers are working with the community on the legislation.

"It's clear Sens. Bingaman and Udall have really gone the extra mile to not only address current concerns but to look far into the future about how to best protect our wilderness areas and provide for strong border security," said Small, also a Las Cruces city councilor.

Frank DuBois, with the group People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, which opposed an initial version of the legislation and instead put forward its own proposal, said he is reviewing the changes.

"I want to applaud Sen. Bingaman for holding a field hearing in Las Cruces and for recognizing border security is such an important issue to the community," he said. "However, I'm disappointed the senator didn't accept the compromise proposed by the Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce to designate the Potrillos as a national conservation area, which would have protected the land but still allowed Border Patrol access to the entire area."

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DuBois said he needs more time to review the changes before commenting further.

Prior to the recent revisions, Senate Bill 1689 would have created 259,000 acres of wilderness in the county, along with 100,850 acres of national conservation area, a more flexible designation. The designations cover three main areas: the Potrillo Mountains, the Organ Mountains and the Broad Canyon area.

Members of the ranching community and Las Cruces Tea Party have said they're worried a wilderness designation in southwestern Do-a Ana County, around the Potrillo Mountains, would hinder law-enforcement access to the area because of a ban on vehicle travel within wilderness. They've argued that could draw smuggling traffic.

Proponents of wilderness, however, contend the designation wouldn't hinder enforcement, thanks to a cooperative agreement among federal agencies that allows for officers involved in a pursuit to access otherwise-restricted lands.

The news release announcing the changes was accompanied by a letter from U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin, indicating the changes would "greatly enhance the flexibility" of the agency to work in the border area.

Also with the revisions:

- Boundaries of the proposed Organ Mountains National Conservation Area were pulled back an extra one-half mile in the area of Anthony, N.M., to allow for future development on the east side of Interstate 10.
- Boundaries of the proposed Organ Mountains

National Conservation Area were pulled back by about 1,000 feet where it parallels the Interstate 10 corridor, to exclude existing flood control structures and allow for building of future flood infrastructure.

- The boundary of the proposed Desert Peaks National Conservation Area, between Las Cruces and Hatch, was pulled back by 300 feet in some places.
- The Prehistoric Trackways National Monument, northwest of Las Cruces, would be expanded by 470 acres to include "recent, new discoveries," according to Bingaman's office.

This week's changes must still be formally adopted into the legislation by the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, of which Bingaman is chairman.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at (575) 541-5443.

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