

Testimony, S 1689

My husband, Dale, and I are ranchers on the Organ Mountains. My father, A. B. Cox, purchased this ranch in 1957. He ran the ranch until his death in 1976, and at that time, Dale and I took over the ranching business.

We attended the field hearing that you held on Monday, and we would like to first thank you very much for allowing a public hearing on the matter of S1689. I would like to submit the following written testimony.

Most of Dona Ana county is already controlled and locked away from the public because it is either controlled by the University or the Military. There are many people that want to take a drive or hike and picnic, and I do not see the sense in locking them out. The government has many regulations on businesses to make sure that their establishments are "handicap accessible", and yet, you are shutting them out of the government land by making it impossible to access it. My family owned Dripping Springs for many years, and now, with the restrictions it has on it, I would not be able to go in there again. Now you want to make most of the public land have the same restrictions?

These areas do NOT meet the requirements of the Wilderness designation. All of these areas have many roads, fences, wells, abandoned mines, corrals, pipelines, windmills, dams, power lines, etc all over them. This is not what Aldo Leopold dreamed of!

We know that the Wilderness Act says that grazing will be allowed. However, it says that it is up to the discretion of the Director. That gives the Director great leeway to do as he sees fit. There are numerous reasons to cut back the amount of cattle that can be on public land, and they use every one that they can think of. I feel that you probably need to talk to many of these ranchers that no longer ranch because of the cutbacks and regulations that the Director deemed "necessary". They put so many restrictions that it soon is no longer viable. Ranchers MUST get access, by motorized vehicles, to their windmills, dirt tanks, and fences. There are a myriad of things that can go wrong with windmills and around stock tanks and cattle, and they have to be checked regularly, not just at the discretion of the Director.

Also, in the Wilderness bill and in NCA rules, it gives several "stakeholders" uses of the land, and ranching and grazing are never included in this. This is because if there is a conflict between the "stakeholders" and grazing, then grazing loses. We can assure you that this is the case because the BLM fenced out about three sections of land on the mountain (IN A Wilderness Study Area), where the best grazing is, for the purpose of "Recreation". The ranchers are the biggest stakeholder because they are paying for the right to use the land, and the others get to use it for nothing. PLEASE INCLUDE GRAZING AS ONE OF THE USES.

The small "buffer" that was "conceded" down near the Border is certainly nothing that would deter illegal and drug smuggling traffic. They can cross that small piece of land quickly and then they are home free to do as they please. The Border Patrol has not stepped up to say what restrictions are on them because of political ramifications, but the RETIRED Border Patrol agents can speak freely with no repercussions. They are trying to let you and others know what the real story is. Please listen to them.

Also, our dams are in need of repair and there is a great need to do other smaller dams to catch the run off from these big rains that we get occasionally. This can NOT be done if the Wilderness designation is put in place.

I keep hearing that there will be more money given to the area if it is designated Wilderness, but it says in the Wilderness bill itself, that there will be no additional monies given to the area.

Another false statement that was brought up was that "there have been no problems on the WSAs and it would not be stricter when the Wilderness designation was in place". We have not been able to do

projects to stop erosion , or place tanks of water or fencing for better utilization of the pastures .
Wilderness designation ends up being NO management for the welfare of the land.

Another concern of all involved, including ranchers, is development in these areas. It is amazing to us that many of the people not wanting developments on the Organ Mountains live out in the area on the Organ Mountains that was developed! Now they want no more development! That is a little hypocritical. However, certain lands can be withdrawn from being sold off by other means other than the Wilderness designation, as you can attest to. Valle Vidal is a perfect example of this, and you were a major component of that . There must be some lands that will be available for future growth of Las Cruces , Hatch, Santa Teresa and Mesilla, but that is up to the discretion of the Dept of Interior.

These are some of my concerns. We respectfully ask that you consider the problems and the “unintended consequences” of the Wilderness designation. We also ask that you consider the “Rangeland Preservation Area” designation that the ranchers and several other groups helped to write. The new administration is wanting to try new things. Don't you think it is time for a new, fresh approach to our Public Land?? We will close with one question-----

Why are you adamant about the Wilderness designation, unless it is to remove ranchers and lock the lands away from the general public?

Thank you,

Dale and Sara Hopkins