

WILD BILLS: A NEW ROUND BEGINS IN THE FIGHT OVER WILDERNESS

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At the rate things have been going, the Utah wilderness debate may not disappear until the Colorado Plateau has eroded into the Gulf of California.

The newly empowered Republican-dominated Congress, however, appears ready to change that when it convenes next year. If Congress passes a Utah wilderness bill, it will be acting in accordance with Utahns' desires, the latest Deseret News/KSL Poll shows. The tricky part for Congress will be finding a bill that a majority of Utahns support.

Seventy-seven percent of Utahns say they favor federally protected wilderness. But there's no strong consensus on how much should be protected.

The poll shows Utahns are almost evenly divided over how many acres of U.S. Bureau of Land Management holdings should be set aside in the national wilderness preservation system.

Nineteen percent want less than 1 million acres; 24 percent favor 1 million to 2 million; 19 percent want between 2 million and 4 million; and 22 percent want more than 4 million.

Simplified further, the poll results show 41 percent want more than 2 million acres, while 43 percent want less than 2 million acres.

The BLM, which manages 22 million acres of federal land in Utah, has identified 3.2 million acres as "wilderness study areas" but recommends that only 2 million of those be permanently protected as wilderness.

The results of the 1994 wilderness poll are similar to a wilderness poll conducted five years ago by the Deseret News.

The big difference in the two polls is the percentage of "don't know" (undecided) responses. In 1989, 32 percent of the people surveyed said they didn't know how many acres of wilderness they favored. The latest poll shows only 16 percent are undecided. The undecided vote has apparently shifted into the range of 2 million to 3 million acres.

Wilderness supporters say they are encouraged by the new poll.

"I think the poll shows Utahns are pro-wilderness," says Ken Rait, spokesman for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, which is leading the Utah Wilderness Coalition's fight for a 5.7 million acre wilderness bill.

Staunch opponents of wilderness say they are surprised by the poll.

"So much depends on how the question was asked," says Rep. Met Johnson, R-new Harmony, who leads a contingent of rural politicians fighting federal wilderness designation. "Do people understand what wilderness designation means?"

Johnson and other wilderness opponents argue that federal protection will virtually lock up lands from development or multiple uses. To rural Utahns, Johnson notes, wilderness is seen as a playground for urban dwellers.

Although, the poll shows that 54 percent of Utahns statewide say wilderness designation makes the areas more desirable to visit, Johnson does have a point when it comes to support for wilderness. In Salt Lake County, 53 percent of those surveyed favor more than 2 million acres, while only 11 percent want less than 1 million. Off the Wasatch Front, only 19 percent of residents favor more than 2 million acres, while 37 percent prefer less than 1 million.

"Those numbers don't surprise me at all," Johnson says.

The numbers do show the divisiveness of the wilderness debate, which has been ongoing for

more than 10 years without compromise.

With the Republican sweep in the November elections, a wilderness bill seems more likely than ever.

"Now that the Utah delegation is more likely to be united and both House and Senate (natural resources) committees seem to be closer to each other in their approach, the window of opportunity to resolve the wilderness issue in Utah is there," says Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah.

And that scares the environment community.

"If anyone thinks we're going to get a good wilderness bill with this Congress, that's nonsense," says Rait.

So far, only two bills - both by Democrats - have been discussed in House circles, although Bennett is planning to advance a wilderness bill with Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, in the Senate.

The environmentalists' cause has been taken up by Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., who plans to re-introduce H.R. 1500, which calls for 5.7 million acres.

"I think that this land is an important part of our national heritage, both for Utahns as well as people of the rest of the nation," says Hinchey.

The congressman admits, though, that his bill doesn't have as much chance now as it once might have. Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, is now the chairman of the Natural Resource Committee and does not favor further federal land restrictions. And Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, the second ranking Republican on the committee, also is opposed to big wilderness.

Hinchey's bill was "not a serious contender in the last Congress and will not be in this Congress," says Bennett.

A member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee, Bennett is working to draft a wilderness bill that would have the support of the entire Utah delegation and Gov. Mike Leavitt.

Though Bennett hasn't decided yet how much acreage should be preserved, he says his bill would not include more than the 2 million acres recommended by the BLM.

"I will probably start looking at the issue in that neighborhood," Bennett says. "The original (BLM wilderness) inventory was done according to a specific process. I'm not sure we want to reinvent that process and start all over again."

He's more likely to favor legislation being prepared by Rep. Bill Orton, D-Utah, who is proposing that 1.2 million acres of BLM lands be designated as wilderness. Orton's bill would also set aside 1.8 million acres of BLM land as "national conservation areas," which receive lesser protection than wilderness but more than they would without the designation.

Orton hopes to meet with the rest of the Utah delegation and the governor the first week of January to get a consensus.

Where do state officials stand on the wilderness issue?

Leavitt spokesman LaVar Webb says the governor still refuses to endorse any specific wilderness bill at this time.

"He'd rather be a broker to bring the sides together," Webb says. "With the result of the elections, there has been some pressure to move ahead very quickly and ram something through. The governor thinks he needs to stay with the process."

That process, though, appears to be as stalemated as ever. The Utah Wilderness Coalition - which is comprised of two dozen local, regional and national environmental groups - plans to use the stalemate to block a bill they don't like.

"In the long run," Rait says, "it's good that Utah wilderness is a national issue because the local politicians seem unwilling to reflect what Utahns want in wilderness."