

LANDS BILL: BATTLE BREWS

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In an effort to resolve part of Utah's biggest public lands war, Rep. Jim Hansen on Thursday quietly introduced a bill in Congress that would designate wilderness on about 1 million acres of federal land in the Great Basin.

The bill, called the Utah National Parks and Public Lands Wilderness Act, also would establish about 1.3 million acres of wilderness inside Utah's national park units.

The Utah Wilderness Coalition, which was not consulted on the bill, vows to kill it, mainly because it says it designates too little wilderness on U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in the Great Basin and the sliver of Mojave Desert in southwestern Utah.

"There's going to be a fight over this," said Heidi McIntosh of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA).

Hansen, R-Utah, spoke in more conciliatory words in introducing the bill Thursday.

"If we can all agree that these areas in the west desert merit protection as wilderness, then why shouldn't we move forward?" he said. "Similarly there is broad consensus on wilderness areas in our national parks. Rather than arguing over bumper stickers, or numbers on a button, I hope we can look at the land itself, area by area, acre by acre, and protect wilderness where it truly exists."

The land battle begins Oct. 19 in Washington, where the bill is scheduled for a hearing before the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, chaired by Hansen.

The wilderness coalition, led by SUWA, backs a separate bill that would set aside 9.1 million acres of BLM lands in Utah as wilderness.

Dubbed America's Redrock Wilderness Act, the bill focuses mainly on the colorful canyon country of southern Utah, but it also would set aside about 2.6 million acres of land in the Great Basin and the Mojave.

Wilderness is considered by environmentalists as the most protective of all public lands designations because of its prohibitions on development, roads and mechanized equipment.

Hansen's bill would ignore the coalition's call for wilderness in Tule Valley in Millard County and the Beaver Dam Wash and Beaver Dam Mountains in the Mojave, McIntosh said.

Environmentalists also oppose the bill because it contains "hard release" language that would preclude all other BLM lands in the Great Basin from future wilderness designation. And the bill

has language that would give the military motorized access to Great Basin wilderness areas, an unnecessary and unprecedented provision, McIntosh said.

Hansen's bill is similar to an initiative launched earlier this year by Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, who tried to get the warring factions together to resolve the Great Basin portion of the wilderness debate.

Leavitt spokeswoman Vicki Varela said the governor supports Hansen's measure.

"The governor's objective is to break [the wilderness debate] down into battles that can be ended," she said.