

WILDS BILL MAKES HEADWAY

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If the political progress made in resolving Utah's long-standing wilderness debate can be measured at the speed of a glacier, then what happened Tuesday at a congressional hearing was akin to a fighter jet flyby.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said he "strongly supports" the acreage and boundary provisions of a bill sponsored by Utah's congressional delegation designating about 1.1 million acres of public land in the West Desert as wilderness.

Although Babbitt does not support Rep. Jim Hansen's "Utah National Parks and Public Lands Wilderness Act" as written, his agreement to the basic premise of the bill represents a major breakthrough.

"We are in a space now where we can get these issues resolved," Babbitt, a former Arizona governor, said in an interview after the hearing. "I want them to get this bill moving. I don't want to see this bill killed by people saying we don't have complete agreement yet."

Babbitt joined Gov. Mike Leavitt at the witness table inside a packed hearing room of Hansen's House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands to discuss the wilderness bill. "It is the most contentious single public-lands issue in the American West," said Babbitt. "We have a chance with this bill to break the deadlock."

The appearance of the governor and secretary speaking in agreement on a wilderness proposal culminated seven years of wilderness discussion between the two men. Both said the bill wasn't perfect. Babbitt is concerned about provisions given the military to restrict access to public lands around the Utah Test and Training Range and language to protect streams and springs in the wilderness areas.

Even Hansen called the legislation "a work in progress," and Leavitt urged Congress to continue working toward an acceptable bill.

"Consensus will never be possible, and this is a political solution to a thorny problem," said the governor. "It is dividing our state culturally. Not everyone likes the solution. But will there ever be a more bipartisan attempt to resolve this?"

Next step for the bill will be a "mark up" session before Hansen's subcommittee sometime early next year. That is when amendments and corrections to the current version will be considered. Although Leavitt and Babbitt sounded a conciliatory note on the amount of BLM acreage protected as federal wilderness, conservationists adamantly oppose the West Desert wilderness acreage as too low.

"The legislation does not confer wilderness designation to all the places equally deserving and most in need of protection," said Mike Matz, executive director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance.

Of the 9.5 million acres of BLM lands in the West Desert and southwest Utah region, conservationists want 2.6 million set aside. Matz, along with Sierra Club officials, said West Desert spots such as Tule Valley, Snake Valley and Doc's Pass should be added to the Hansen bill.

Others were willing to swallow the acreage provisions, in spite of some heartburn, if there were assurances this would be the end of the wilderness debate in the western half of Utah.

"Even though there are acres in this proposed wilderness which we feel do not meet the criteria of wilderness, we are willing to compromise," said Beaver County Commissioner Chad Johnson. "For this compromise, Beaver County needs the language in this legislation retained regarding livestock grazing, overflights, management of adjacent property and release language, giving us some assurance this process has truly come to an end."

Wilderness advocates and at least one member of the subcommittee are unhappy with the "release language" in Hansen's bill. This provision states lands that had been protected as potential wilderness but were not included in the bill will be released to normal multiple-use management. Such provisions are common in all wilderness bills, but environmentalists fear the wording in Hansen's bill could be interpreted as an attempt to prevent any future wilderness additions in the West Desert.

"I do not object to the release of millions of acres of BLM land in the West Desert, but I am deeply concerned that all the remaining land would be released when I am convinced that so much of this land has not been thoroughly reviewed and that its qualities and values are not well understood," said Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-N.Y., whose own Utah wilderness bill would protect the 2.6 million West Desert acres sought by conservationists.

Brad Barber, an aide to Leavitt, said Hinchey and other wilderness advocates are misinterpreting this provision and there is no attempt to block future wilderness consideration in the area. The goal is simply to release those areas now being studied for wilderness. He noted that this portion of the bill was written by aides to Babbitt, not by Hansen or his staff.

The Interior secretary focused his criticism of Hansen's bill on the unusually broad powers given the military over control of wilderness areas within the restricted airspace of the Utah Test and Training Range, a vast area in western Utah and eastern Nevada used to train military pilots.

"The language goes vastly beyond anything the Air Force has ever demanded in a wilderness bill and it would give them unfettered discretion to put up facilities inside wilderness areas and to exclude the public unilaterally from wilderness areas outside the training range," said Babbitt.

Hansen acknowledged the overflight language may need polishing and asked for Babbitt's help.

Babbitt said two additional areas in the West Desert should receive at least moderate levels of protection in this bill. He recommended that the Newfoundland Mountains, which rise from the Bonneville Salt Flats, be designated a "national natural landmark." He also said the Rockwell area of the Little Sahara sand dunes northeast of Delta should be expanded and designated an "outstanding natural area."