

WILDS BILL CHEERED, JEERED

Jerry D. Spangler and Donna Kemp Spangler

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It may sound strange, but environmentalists are lining up in opposition to a 500,000-acre wilderness bill, even though it would, in effect, block a consortium of nuclear power utilities from building a nuclear waste repository in Tooele County.

And blocking Private Fuel Storage from shipping waste to the Skull Valley is not reason enough to gain their support of an amendment inserted by Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, into a defense appropriations bill passed early Friday morning by the U.S. House.

"It's a real weakening of the Wilderness Act," said Heidi McIntosh, issues coordinator for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, which is pushing its own 9.1 million-acre wilderness bill in Congress. "It is not a true wilderness bill."

But it is a bill that would use wilderness to block storage of nuclear waste in Utah, and Gov. Mike Leavitt is praising Hansen's strategy.

"It is a profound event in respect to our fight against the nuclear storage in this state," Leavitt told the Deseret News. "We have declared over and over we will use every tool available to us. This is a powerful and new obstacle to those who are inclined to bring nuclear waste into Utah."

Hansen announced the move during Saturday's GOP state convention in Sandy, calling the bill the last important thing he wants to accomplish during his 22-year tenure in Washington.

The amendment would designate as official wilderness the current lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management that abut the Skull Valley Goshute Indian Reservation and all the way to I-80 and the Union Pacific rail line that would be used to ship the waste to Utah.

Wilderness designation means nothing could be built there, including the rail spur PFS needs to build from I-80 south to the Goshute Reservation. With no rail access, the proposal to store 40,000 tons of the highly radioactive waste on tribal lands there is likely stalled, maybe even dead.

Hansen said PFS officials have been lobbying Congress furiously to get the amendment removed during Senate consideration of the \$383 billion national security spending bill for 2003.

"It's clear that this provision has caught the attention and concerns of a lot of different people," said PFS spokeswoman Sue Martin. "It would fundamentally change the way federal lands are managed across the country. There are a lot of environmental groups other than SUWA watching this with concern."

The irony of SUWA's opposition to the Hansen wilderness bill is that SUWA attorney Joro Walker argued two weeks ago before the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board, meeting in Salt Lake City to consider the PFS license, that granting PFS a waste storage license would diminish the wilderness quality of surrounding lands.

Others are skeptical of Hansen's wilderness approach.

Tooele County Commissioner Dennis Rockwell said the government already controls 87 percent of the county, and anything that would block access to public lands would be of concern to him. "The Cedar Mountains attract a lot of recreationists," he said.

Tooele County commissioners have taken the position that the nuclear waste is coming anyway so why not get some revenue from it to help pay for schools and government services.

"I don't know whether the bill will stop that or not. (Hansen) must believe that it could," Rockwell said.

Conservationists are concerned primarily with Hansen's provisions that designate the 500,000 acres of wilderness in Utah's western desert, but they also exempt military overflights, recovery and installation, maintenance and removal of military equipment.

"The ironic thing is that while Hansen has argued for years that wilderness interferes with military activities, the military has gone into wilderness areas to retrieve equipment with no problems," McIntosh said. "It's a sham. It would treat public lands with wilderness values as if they are first and foremost military lands. It gives the military oversight of lands that are truly in the public domain. This has never before happened in a wilderness bill."

"It's like throwing a baby out with the bath water," she added.

Hansen said his efforts will be focused on keeping the amendment in the final legislation during any conference committee that resolves differences between the House and Senate versions. "We've got a battle ahead," he said.

On that, Martin agrees.

"That's not the end of it," she said of the House passage. "It still has a long ways to go."