

Senate panel approves bill

Local wilderness legislation ready for floor vote

By **Todd G. Dickson**

Las Cruces Bulletin

Controversy surrounding a bill to create wilderness areas in Doña Ana County didn't deter a key U.S. Senate committee from passing it unanimously and clearing the way for it to be voted on by the full Senate.

The Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, which must also pass the House and be signed by the president, would designate 241,400 acres as wilderness and 99,150 acres as National Conservation Areas (NCA).

The Energy and Natural Resources Committee, chaired by New Mexico U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, approved the bill Wednesday, July 21. Bingaman and fellow New Mexico U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, both Democrats, are sponsors of the bill.

Bingaman's office noted that the committee is made up of 13 Democrats and 10 Republicans, which wilderness supporters say reflect bipartisan support for the legislation.

Locally, the division between supporters and proponents has mostly centered on the Potrillo Mountains in the south-

eastern section of the county near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Acknowledging the border region's unique security challenges, Bingaman's office stated in its release on the committee's action, the legislation sets a three-mile non-wilderness "buffer area and an additional two-mile 'Restricted Use Area.'" Although the general public would be prohibited from motorized access in the area, "it will permit the Border Patrol to conduct routine patrols and construct communication and surveillance infrastructure as it would on regular multiple-use land," the release stated.

Bingaman cited a letter from a U.S. Customs official supporting the legislation. (This letter of support is discussed in a guest column on page A7.)

"Today's vote shows that collaboration

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and consensus building pays off," said Las Cruces City Councillor Gill Sorg in a news release distributed by the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. "Sen. Bingaman should be commended for reaching out, listening to concerns and making changes to his legislation to make it as strong as possible."

Paul Deason, a local wilderness supporter with expertise in anti-terrorism, said the bill struck a balance between those wanting to preserve undeveloped areas and those concerned about border security.