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Wilderness alternatives sought

Congressional legislation will restrict access, group says



Tom Cooper stands on his ranch Tuesday, Nov. 10, with the Robledo Mountains in the distance. Cooper is one of the ranchers concerned that proposed federal wilderness and conservation designations will make it more difficult to access and maintain ranching operations.

STEVE MACINTYRE
The Las Cruces Bulletin

By **MARVIN TESSNEER**
The Las Cruces Bulletin

In response to a bill in Congress to designate areas in Doña Ana County as protected wilderness, The People for Preserving Our Western Heritage contends that the Bureau of Land Management has better alternatives than to restrict access through the Wilderness Act.

"Let's protect the land through withdrawal and by preventing degradation uses and still retain the open spaces," said Jerry Schickedanz, president of PFPOWH, which he said is a coalition of 791 county businesses and organizations.

Schickedanz is one of the few people

who was allowed to testify last month before the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness Act, introduced by New Mexico Democratic Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall. Bingaman also chairs the committee.

The committee gave him five minutes for his oral testimony. "And they had a little box with lights in front of me signaling when my time was about up," said Schickedanz, who is a professor emeritus of range management at New Mexico State University.

"The citizens of Doña Ana County and the PFPOWH agree on the need for protection," he testified. "We just don't agree

on the method. We have suggested a Rangeland Protection Area designation as an alternate method of land protection. We feel that it is time to develop a new land protection designation that is not as restrictive as a wilderness designation to correspond with lands that are not meeting the gold standard of wilderness."

BLM and wilderness

The Bureau of Land Management Organic Act of 1976 authorized the agency to inventory its land for wilderness characteristics under the jurisdiction of the 1964 Wilderness Act. Characteristics for wilderness include remote and roadless

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areas and open spaces that had not been changed by humans, Schickedanz said.

After the inventory, the bureau identified and designated 10 Wilderness Study Areas (WSA) in Doña Ana County, Schickedanz said, which was reviewed by a group of city and county stakeholders. The WSAs included three Organ Mountain sites, Mount Riley and the Aden Lava Flow, the East and West Potrillo Mountains, the Robledo Mountains and Broad Canyon. The coalition favored wilderness designation in the Organs but recommended the other areas be returned to multiple uses.

"We support permanently preserving and protecting the Organ Mountains and the other special areas in our county," Schickedanz said. "We believe that there are viable alternatives to federal wilderness designation that can be used to protect our land, our natural resources and our open space. We encourage and believe in beneficial and balanced stewardship of our federal lands, which requires an accurate understanding of the facts."

"It seems that the BLM is trying to place areas into wilderness that don't meet the wilderness criteria. When we recommended to Bingaman that the Las Uvas and Robledo mountains should not be considered for wilderness, that the BLM should put them back into multiple use with an alternate protection designation, nothing was done. And then they added Broad Canyon, which doesn't meet the wilderness criteria."

If the Wilderness Act were authorized,

many of the roads that are in the WSAs would be closed to vehicle traffic. He referred to the Portillo Mountains as an example:

"This is a favorite place for dove and quail hunters. Only what they call cherry stem roads would be open so that ranchers could check their water wells and improvement. It also would be closed to the Border Patrol."

Traditional uses

"I got involved because I don't think that what the ranchers were saying was being listened to," Schickedanz said. "I think that there's so much misinformation going around on the wilderness issues, a lot of the issues are not clarified. Once an area is designated a Wilderness Area, motor wheeled vehicles wouldn't be allowed. The Border Patrol and sheriff's deputies would not be allowed to make routine patrols."

Ranchers are concerned that they would not have access to their improvements, fences, water tanks, windmills and solar pumps, he said.

"One of the BLM guidelines in the act is that ranchers would have occasional access to check windmills and pipelines and maintain corrals," Schickedanz said. "But no one will define what they mean by occasional. It could mean a month or more. It doesn't clear up anything."

Ranchers also contend that the purposes section of S. 1689, the wilderness bill needs more specifics. The bill seeks to establish 259,000 acres of wilderness and 100,000 acres of National Conservation Areas. It reads in part:

"The purposes of the Conservation Areas are to conserve, protect and enhance for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations the cultural, archaeo-

logical, natural, geological, historical, ecological, wildlife, educational, recreational and scenic resources of the areas."

"And we say, 'let's add grazing or ranching in purposes,'" Schickedanz said.

The PPPOWH also is concerned that wilderness designation could prevent flood control maintenance.

"The wilderness designation could lock up vehicle access so that we couldn't get in to remove silt from dams or water tanks or to add smaller dams," Schickedanz said. "You can get permits, but you have to go through a lot of red tape. We don't think that we're being unreasonable in our recommendation. The BLM should put a little common sense into their designations."

Border security

During the 1990s, Border Patrol tried

to intercept drug and human smuggling with operations Hold the Line in El Paso and Gate Keeper in San Diego. Those operations diverted much of the smuggling into the desert areas of Arizona, where designated federal wilderness areas and monuments restrict patrols, Schickedanz reported in his written testimony.

Schickedanz' testimony included a quote from retired Border Patrol officer Gene Wood, former chief of the McAllen, Texas, sector:

"You've got private ownership of land with a very aggressive citizenry in Texas protecting their property rights. They interact immediately and continuously with the Border Patrol, and the Border Patrol has full and unencumbered access to everything, at any time and for any reason."

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