

Pearce hears debate on Organ Mountains monument proposal

By Steve Ramirez / sramirez@lcsun-news.com Las Cruces Sun-News
Posted:

lcsun-news.com

Read the federal legislation - House Resolution 4334 - introduced by Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., to establish a monument in Doña Ana County.

LAS CRUCES — It got lively, even a little cantankerous at times Friday, but those who support, oppose or question efforts to establish the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument had their say.

A congressional forum attended by Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., drew a standing-room-only crowd in the auditorium at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum. It was an opportunity for people to comment on House Resolution 4334, the legislation Pearce has introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives to establish the monument.

Pearce's legislation would preserve the Organs, but differences in opinions began for other areas that supporters of a national monument designation want included.

"The Organ Mountains are one of the true treasures in New Mexico," Pearce said. "As a result, the protection of this landmark has become a broad political discussion. I have always supported the idea that we should not build on the Organs, as it is one of the signature landmarks of our district. There is no question that we must protect the land, but there have been distinct disagreements on how to best accomplish this."

Much of the discussion at Friday's forum centered on the designation of wilderness areas, which has stirred the pot of political rhetoric for several years. The difference of philosophies has become emotional at times through the years, and Friday was no different.

"Why do we have to protect 600,000 acres? That sounds like a lot to me," said Las Cruces Ron Camunez. "We have to look at all that issues; let's ask the tough questions."

To Pearce, Camunez added, "I hope you look at things for what they really are and investigate. Stop the idiocy behind this movement."

But Jeff Steinborn, who has helped spearhead efforts aimed at convincing President Obama to sign documentation that would formally designate the proposed national monument, countered there is broad-based support for its creation. He pointed out that supporters of the proposal include the communities of Las Cruces, Mesilla and El Paso, the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces and the city's Green Chamber of Commerce, the High Tech Consortium of Southern New Mexico, the League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, and the Southwest Consolidated Sportsmen.

"Something big is happening here," Steinborn said. "We all support a national monument. ...We all love these places, and this we share in common."

But tensions flared when Steinborn claimed that both sides were not being allowed to participate in the forum. That quickly changed, and forum moderators announced that comments for and against the monument proposal would be alternated.

Pearce has said his bill allows room for public input through the legislative process.

"Additionally, it is not as restrictive as wilderness designation," said Pearce, of his legislation. "The proposed lands have been deemed unsuitable for wilderness protection. While I believe that my legislation is the best solution, I look forward to hearing all of the proposals and hearing questions and concerns in an open forum with the public."

But supporters of the national monument said Pearce hasn't really kept in the spirit of balanced public discussion.

Billy Garrett, Doña Ana County Commissioner, expressed concern that local elected officials and community leaders were not consulted when Pearce drafted his legislation.

"Local input is essential," Garrett said. "I'm sure that a more open process would point out the importance of buffer areas to protect White Sands Missile Range and Fort Bliss, support environmentally based economic activity, and recognize the heritage values that are at the heart of the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument proposal. I urge Congressman Pearce to amend his legislation based on community supported conservation priorities."

But Tom Cooper, who operates a ranch in the Uvas Mountains, north and west of Las Cruces, said opinions of all of those who could be affected by the national monument designation haven't been heard. He believes that almost all cattle ranchers could be hurt by the proposed designation because there is nothing in writing that protects grazing rights.

"What's in the presidential decree?" Cooper asked. "No one knows, because such a document hasn't even been publicly produced yet. Until we know what's in it, what it says, there's absolutely no assurances that grazing will be protected. We should be able to see that document and be able to comment on it before anything becomes official."

There were also concerns about how the designation might affect border security.

"Law enforcement can tell you they're getting ready for a drug war," said Bud Deerman, president of the Doña Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau. "We're the next place it's going to happen if we can't stop it. It's coming."

But Steinborn said, "Don't let fear dominate the discussion."

Las Cruces Mary Ortega said she wasn't being swayed one way or another.

"I've heard both proposals," she said. "National monuments are already protected by law enforcement. I say preserve the culture, preserve the people."

Jim Bates, a Las Cruces sportsman, who has been actively involved in wildlife and conservation issues in southern New Mexico for decades, said he has concerns about Pearce's proposal to eliminate some areas around Las Cruces from national monument consideration.

"Protecting areas such as the Uvas and Potrillo Mountains, which have tremendous value for sportsmen, goes hand-in-hand with the proposal to protect the Organs," Bates said. "The monument proposal for these areas protects wildlife and habitat, and ensures hunting and other recreational uses will continue as part of the management of these important places."

Margie Rankin, a former elementary teacher, said the opinions of farmers, ranchers and those involved in agriculture should also be strongly considered.

"They all are very good stewards of the land," she said. "Individual farmers and ranchers have the knowledge to make the right decisions."

Las Cruces John Zimmerman added water issues must be factored in as well.

"If we don't do something to preserve our water, we're in deep trouble," Zimmerman said.

Pearce said his staff members compiled nine pages of notes from the lively points and counter-points.

"The conversation has been productive and important to Las Cruces," he said.

Steve Ramirez can be reached at (575) 541-5452. Also follow him on Twitter: @SteveRamirez6.

Public forum

— A congressional forum, attended by Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., was conducted Friday at the New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum.

— The forum was to allow southern New Mexico residents to express their viewpoints about efforts to establish the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks as a national monument.

— The proposed monument would include as much as 600,000 acres.

— There are 243 known archeological sites within the proposed monument.

— The proposed monument area also includes prominent landmarks such as: the Butterfield Trail, Billy the Kid's Outlaw Rock, Geronimo's Cave, Kilbourne Hole and Aden Lava Flow.