

What are the True Costs of Wilderness?

by JERRY G. SCHICKEDANZ,
Dean Emeritus College of Agriculture and Home Economics, NMSU

The 2007-08 Congress is preparing to consider S. 3212, the Senate Omnibus Federal Lands Bill, a combination of at least 150 separate land management proposals under a single bill! It is difficult to understand the complexity and ramifications of the more than 1,000 pages in the bill. Among the ramifications are restrictions placed on access to 800 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and 300 million barrels of oil, plus a \$3 billion dollar outlay, a cost to American taxpayers to implement the bill. Can a Senator or Congressman possibly study and understand much of what will be voted on?

The Unrecognized Costs To All Citizens

In New Mexico, environmentalists have listed 3,000,000 acres in 164 areas which they claim have wilderness potential, including several areas and hundreds of thousands of acres near the Mexican border.

The border between Mexico and the United States stretches approximately 2,100 miles from San Diego, California to Brownsville, Texas. Some 160 miles lie along the New Mexico border. It is characterized by mountains, canyons, desert grasslands and barbed wire. It is open country that has little human habitation on either side. The three border crossings at Antelope Wells, Columbus, and Santa Teresa, New Mexico are 50-75 miles apart. Throughout its length, the number of illegal crossings by immigrants looking for work, drug cartel members carrying illegal drugs and Mexican gang members fluctuate with the increased efforts by Homeland Security forces to stem the flow. Increased

deterrent efforts in urban areas of Texas, Arizona, and California have led to increased flows in more rural locations. Isolated areas such as the New Mexico border have experienced significant increases in illegal traffic. Wilderness on and near the border provides corridors for such activities.

The Wilderness designation for land protection brings many unrecognized costs. A recent example was when over \$16,000 was spent in helicopter time to remove remains of a private airplane crash in the Sandia Wilderness, because wilderness demands that the imprint of man be substantially unnoticed. The prevention of routine vehicular access and flyovers invites illegal activity. It is estimated that 8 pounds of trash in bottles, clothes, cans and paper are left behind by every illegal immigrant. Large amounts of human waste accumulate near pickup points and riparian zones. Keeping such areas cleaned up in wilderness is not possible. Because of the illegal border activity and danger to the American public, in August, 2008 all backcountry areas of Arizona's Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument were closed indefinitely to both hiking and overnight camping. As a result, the area has suffered a major loss of tourism dollars, impacting the local economy.

The El Paso Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol, which covers the New Mexico-Mexico border, routinely reports apprehensions of illegal aliens who are admitted members of ruthless gangs such as Sureno 13, Azteca, and Los Surenos. These people are not here on a vacation or

sight seeing tour of the Southwest. Their intentions are not good. The true costs to American taxpayers from activities of these Mexican gangs are much more than we can imagine.

Such activities have led to the concerns of Homeland Security for crossing of terrorists bent on doing harm to America and its citizens. It was reported by the Border Patrol in the *El Paso Times*, August 2008, that there are more than two dozen probes each day by potential terrorists looking for areas to be exploited along our southern border. Border violence in just Juarez and Palomas, Mexico has led to more than one thousand deaths, and the threat that this will spill over into the U.S. is considered likely by experts. Death lists were published with 22 names of Mexican officials to be killed. All but one on the lists were either murdered or resigned their positions in law enforcement. It has been reported, but not yet confirmed, that a number of U.S. officials are included on a similar list.

We must all be aware that there are organizations in New Mexico advocating more wilderness in southern New Mexico, including more than 150,000 acres in the Potrillo Mountains area adjacent to the Mexican border. Advocates propose this area as part of 320,000 acres that lie mostly south of Interstate 10 in Doña Ana County. Their inventory of lands they consider worthy of wilderness designations also includes large areas near the border in Luna and Hidalgo Counties.

The Huge Costs To Ranchers

Wilderness designations seriously impact the market values of ranches. The loss of access and other restrictions imposed in wilderness impact the ranchers' ability to maintain the water system and other improvements. The results include decreases in carrying capacity, causing the inability to earn a living and make a return on investment.

With the current push for wilderness designations for millions of acres across the U.S., with even more proposals likely to be considered in the new Congress, I believe it is imperative that each proposed designation be thoroughly studied and vetted for more than just wilderness characteristics and placement in the wilderness system of land management. Every proposal must be scrutinized for its true costs to the citizens. The protection of lands is one thing, but associated risks to national security and public safety stemming from reduced ability to protect the border is another, even greater, concern. □

Attention: Ranchers in NM and Across the West

Join with the NM Stockman, NM Cattle Growers, NM Wool Growers, NM Dept. of Agriculture, NM Farm and Livestock Bureau, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, La Union Soil and Water Conservation District, NM Federal Lands Council, Assn. of AZ/NM Counties, Nat'l. Assn. of Retired Border Patrol Officers, and hundreds of farms, ranches and other businesses, which are members of the Coalition in support of the Doña Ana County Planned Growth, Open Space and Rangeland Preservation Act of 2008 (HR 6300), introduced by Congressman Steve Pearce.

It is critical that we stand together against the radical statewide wilderness agenda!

Visit www.PeopleForWesternHeritage.com and click on "Take Action".

From there, signing up is easy - and it's important!