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## Our view: Wilderness bill must allow for border security

Sun-News report

Posted: 06/27/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT

Las Cruces— For the past several years, this newspaper has been a supporter of federal wilderness designation for those lands in Doña Ana County classified as wilderness study area.

We had hoped that opponents and supporters of the concept would eventually be able to come together and find common ground in crafting that bill. Instead, the two groups have grown further apart.

That's especially true in the area of border security. Nowhere was this more evident than at a meeting in May in which retired Border Patrol officers insisted that wilderness has hampered their ability to secure the border.

"If there is a wilderness designation, Border Patrol has to go around it," retired Border Patrol Supervisor Zack Taylor said.

Not so, countered Border Patrol spokesman Ramiro Cordero. "We're still allowed to patrol anywhere ... if there's any danger or pursuit, we're not going to stop. There's no truth that we cannot go in."

In a letter from U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin to Sen. Jeff Bingaman, he clearly states the wilderness bill "would not restrict CBP from pursuit of suspects within the wilderness area, including the use of motorized vehicles in hot pursuit."

The question is, would the Border Patrol be able to conduct routine patrols? Would it be able to place and then replace infrastructure as needed and wherever needed?

Amendments to the bill following a field hearing here have improved access for Border Patrol. We applaud

those changes. But before the legislation is set for final passage, we want to ensure that nothing in the bill would hamper border security. The time to raise and address these concerns is now. Once the bill is passed, making changes becomes much more difficult.

We are not completely convinced that problems with wilderness area in Arizona should preclude wilderness in southern New Mexico. And we note that much of the land is already wilderness study area, with access restrictions in place. But we should learn from Arizona's mistakes and ensure they are not repeated here.

We continue to believe there are great benefits to wilderness designation, and legislation should be pursued. But we are unsettled by the conflicting information about Border Patrol access. If the current wilderness designation goes too far in its restrictions, then perhaps the stakeholders should hammer out a different understanding of "wilderness."

Either way, we urge Bingaman to go as far as necessary to ensure that Border Patrol will have complete and unfettered access to all areas along the border before putting the bill up for final action.

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