

Bill would designate 23M acres of wilderness

By MATTHEW DALY
Associated Press writer
Wednesday, February 11, 2009 7:23 PM MST

WASHINGTON -- A New York congresswoman has again introduced a wide-reaching wilderness protection bill that would ban logging, oil exploration and other development on 23 million acres across five Northwestern states.

As in previous years, the proposal by Democratic Rep. Carolyn Maloney drew criticism from some Western lawmakers who view it as an intrusion on their turf. The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act would designate millions of new wilderness acreage in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, and add smaller amounts of wilderness in eastern Oregon and eastern Washington.

No member of Congress from any of the five states has agreed to co-sponsor the bill, which Maloney has pushed in Congress since 1993. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., is a co-sponsor of the latest version. The bill would create 9.5 million acres of new wilderness in Idaho, 7 million acres in Montana, 5 million acres in Wyoming, 750,000 acres in northeastern Oregon and 500,000 acres in eastern Washington.

Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., called the bill a "top-down approach" that does not account for impacts on the local economy or adequately protect access for hunting, fishing and other forms of recreation.

"Montana doesn't need Washington, D.C., imposing its will and telling us how to take care of our public lands," Rehberg said. "We're going to fight this. As a state that's almost one-third public lands, we have no choice."

Maloney, who represents New York City, said the bill would protect some of America's most beautiful and ecologically important lands while saving money and creating jobs.

"Many of America's most precious natural resources and wildlife are found in the Northern Rockies," she said, adding that the wilderness proposal "would help protect those resources by drawing wilderness boundaries according to science, not politics."

The measure would also mitigate the effect of climate change on wildlife by protecting corridors that allow grizzly bears, caribou, elk, bison, wolves and other wildlife to migrate to cooler areas, she said.

The plan would forbid most development across broad swaths of public land in the five states. It calls for the removal of more than 6,000 miles of existing roads, primarily within national forests. Old logging roads would be removed, and habitat restored in most of those areas, creating about 2,300 jobs and leading to a more sustainable economic base in the region, said Michael Garrity, executive director of the Montana-based Alliance for the Wild Rockies, an advocacy group.

The wilderness measure has been introduced every Congress for nearly two decades, but has only twice made it so far as a public hearing -- in 1994 and in 2007.

A significant number of Democrats, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, spoke favorably of the bill in 2007, and even more lawmakers from both parties are likely to back the bill this year, Garrity said.

"We think we're making tremendous progress. We have a new president who is much more supportive of wilderness, and we think we have an excellent chance" of winning congressional approval, Garrity said.

A key argument in favor of the bill is a plan to dismantle old logging roads and restore habitat in many areas that have been clear-cut by logging, Garrity said. "This bill puts people to work" in a manner reminiscent of the old Civilian Conservation Corps created in the New Deal, he said.