

# Preserving our past

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The Cherokee Trail, shown here in Wyoming, originates in northeast Oklahoma at Tahlequah, crosses Kansas and Colorado, and enters Wyoming south of Laramie. (Candy Moulton/Star-Tribune correspondent)

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ENCAMPMENT -- Wyoming's historic trails are among 64 across the country that will be studied to determine where new segments should be incorporated into already existing national routes, potentially adding thousands of miles of trail within the state to protected areas, said Oregon-California Trails Association President Glenn Harrison.

The Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, approved by Congress last week and signed into law this week by President Obama, is "the most significant boost for historic trail preservation since 1978, when Congress established the National Historic Trails category of the National Trails Act," Harrison said.

The act includes authorization to study additional routes and cutoffs of the Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California and Pony Express National Historic trails, including an 1849 trail to California blazed by Cherokees. Previously approved by the Senate, 73-21 with both Sen. Mike Enzi and Sen. John Barrasso in favor, the bill passed the House by a vote of 285 to 140. Rep. Cynthia Lummis opposed the measure.

"We've been hoping for this for a long time," said Harrison. "This bill will enable the National Park Service to conduct feasibility studies for designation of important routes in 14 states from Missouri to the Pacific Coast, and may add thousands of miles of additional historic trails to the National Trails System."

An 1849 trail to California blazed by Cherokees in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) is included in the bill. This Cherokee Trail originates in northeast Oklahoma at Tahlequah, crosses Kansas and Colorado, and enters Wyoming south of Laramie. From there it splits. The earliest branch (1849-1850) parallels the Wyoming-Colorado border, passing near Encampment, Baggs and Green River, while the later route

(1851-1861), much of which was incorporated into the later-era (1862) Overland Trail, follows more closely along Interstate 80, passing near Laramie, Elk Mountain, Rawlins, Rock Springs and Green River. Both routes join the main branch of the California National Historic Trail at Fort Bridger.

"Passage of this legislation will have a long-term benefit for the preservation of historic trails," said Bill Martin, vice president of OCTA. "It will help assure that thousands of additional miles of emigrant routes that are part of our nation's heritage are not only identified, but are not lost to history. We are grateful to all Americans who reached out to their elected officials and urged support for this bill."

Funding to actually begin the feasibility studies is expected to be in place early next year, said OCTA Legislative Liaisons Bill and Jeanne Watson. Both said the bill specifies these studies should be completed in about three years.

The bipartisan measure will safeguard more than 5,000 miles of national trails, including National Scenic Trail designation of the 1,200-mile Pacific Northwest Trail, and the Ice Age Floods Geologic Trail, which runs from Montana, through Idaho, Oregon and Washington. It also has provisions to consider designation of the Chisholm Trail and the Great Western Trail for study and possible addition to the National Trails System.

The act designates more than two million acres of wilderness and protects more than 1,100 miles of rivers and 350,000 acres of land along 86 new Wild and Scenic Rivers including the upper reaches of the Snake River. It also limits mining leases in the Wyoming Range.

Lesley Wischman of the Wyoming Historic Alliance noted that the measure has further implications for Wyoming's historic resources.

It fully authorizes the National Landscape Conservation System, which establishes a new system of public lands that will protect some 26 million acres of American heritage. These lands include waterways and cultural resources managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Two other provisions would provide potential grant funds for Wyoming organizations involved in heritage preservation. The Preserve America Act authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to provide competitive grants that would support preservation efforts through heritage tourism, education and historic preservation planning activities while Save America's Treasures authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to provide grants to preserve nationally-significant collections and historic properties.