

Senate passes protection bills; Wyo Range, Snake River measures now go to House



Wyoming Range near Bondurant. A bill that cleared the Senate Thursday would prohibit further oil and gas leasing in the range. (Mark Gocke, Star-Tribune)

From staff and wire reports
Thursday, January 15, 2009 9:02 PM MST

WASHINGTON -- More than a year and a half after his death, the U.S. Senate Thursday approved two conservation measures favored by Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo.

On a 73-21 vote, the Senate passed a large package of bills that includes legislation to prohibit further oil and gas leasing in the Wyoming Range, and to protect 387 miles of streams in the Snake River drainage under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Thomas's successor, Sen. John Barrasso, and Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., both voted in favor of the legislation -- which also includes a provision obligating the federal government to help states compensate ranchers for livestock killed by wolves.

"A state deserves the right to protect and reserve its most valuable places -- the Wyoming Range is such a place," said JJ Healey, a Daniel-based rancher who's part of a coalition that has advocated for the bill. "I believe the late Senator Thomas is smiling today and is proud of our senators."

The package of bills now heads to the House, where it's expected to pass by a large margin -- in spite of the opposition of Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo.

Thomas introduced the bill to designate parts of the Snake River and its tributaries as "wild and scenic" in May 2007, a month before his death. Such designation protects water quality and the free-flowing nature

of rivers while allowing the continued multiple use of the streams and surrounding lands. There's no effect on water rights, interstate water compacts or private property rights.

The bill was subsequently renamed the Craig Thomas Snake Headwaters Legacy Act and included in the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, the package the Senate approved on Thursday.

"The Snake headwaters bill was the last bill Craig introduced in the Senate," said his widow, Susan Thomas, in a press release Thursday. "Craig wanted to protect Wyoming's special places for future generations and help our small businesses and tourism economy, and this bill does that. I'm so proud and grateful that his legacy will live on with a bill that he talked about literally on his last day -- to give you an idea of how important it was to him."

Before his June 2007 death, Thomas also had been crafting legislation to protect the Wyoming Range from further oil and gas leasing. Building on that work, Barrasso introduced the Wyoming Range Legacy Act in 2007, after he was appointed to replace Thomas.

The bill would prohibit any new oil and gas leasing, mining patents or geothermal leasing in a 100-mile-long stretch of the Bridger-Teton National Forest in western Wyoming. It also would allow conservation groups to buy and retire existing energy leases from willing sellers.

"This is truly a remarkable piece of legislation in that citizens, sportsmen, politicians, and conservationists have put aside their individual biases and goals to collectively protect a special place," said Dan Smitherman, a former Wyoming Range outfitter. "Hopefully these efforts will bring a new dawn of nonpartisan cooperation that leads to protecting the places that Wyoming holds dear. My thanks to the many people who made this happen and especially to Senator Barrasso for embracing the vision of the late Senator Thomas."

Critics of the Wyoming Range legislation -- and of the broader package of bills of which it's a part -- say it's too restrictive and hurts the nation's efforts toward energy independence.

"Congress should have taken more time to analyze the impact of this broad-sweeping legislation on domestic energy production before it acted," said Marc Smith, executive director of the Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States. "The Intermountain West is a critical energy supplier to the country, contributing 27 percent of the nation's natural gas. America's dual goal of increasing energy security and reducing greenhouse gas emissions simply cannot be achieved if Congress continues to restrict domestic energy development."

Responding to such criticism, Barrasso responded on the Senate floor last week by pointing out that the most recent estimates of the volumes of oil and gas in the Wyoming Range are much smaller than earlier figures, that the bill wouldn't invalidate existing leases, and that Wyoming is already the largest exporter of energy in the country.

"There must be a balance between helping the nation meet its energy needs and maintaining the quality of life the people of Wyoming have come to enjoy," he said.

In voicing opposition to the overall package of legislation, Lummis said earlier this week she would support the Wyoming Range and Snake River protection bills with amendments, but noted that no such amendments are being allowed by Democratic leaders. She also decried the \$4 billion price tag of the overall package.

A small part of that overall cost is \$1 million to be spent annually to help Wyoming, Idaho and Montana compensate ranchers for livestock killed by wolves once they're no longer listed as an endangered species. That money also would pay for grants to states and Indian tribes to reduce the risk of livestock attacks, by erecting fences and improving grazing practices.

Approval came a day after the government announced its plan to remove gray wolves from the endangered species list in the western Great Lakes and Northern Rockies, except Wyoming.

