

## Snake, Wyoming Range bill clears Senate hurdle

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A bill that includes protections for the Snake River watershed and Wyoming Range is expected to get a vote in the Senate later this week after advancing Sunday.

By a 66-12 vote, with only 59 needed to limit debate, lawmakers agreed to clear away procedural hurdles on the public lands omnibus bill that includes the local measures and about 160 other bills, despite partisan wrangling.

The Craig Thomas Snake Headwaters Legacy Act would protect 387 miles of rivers and streams in the Snake River drainage under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The Wyoming Range Legacy Act would prohibit further energy leasing on 1.2 million acres in the Wyoming Range, Salt River Range and Commissary Ridge areas south of Jackson Hole and would allow conservation groups to buy and retire existing energy leases.

"This was a critical test for this legislation, which is so important for Wyoming's small businesses, our outfitters, our tourism-based economy and our natural resources," Campaign for the Snake Headwaters Executive Director Tom Patricelli, who traveled to Washington to witness the vote, said in a statement. "This legislation protects Wyoming's special places while giving a much-needed boost to our economy in these uncertain times."

The Snake River bill was originally introduced in May 2007 by Sen. Craig Thomas, one month before his death, as a way to recognize the rivers and to boost Wyoming tourism. During the past two years, the bill has been amended to further protect water rights and codify public access. The modified version passed the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee last spring.

"We are that much closer to realizing Craig's original idea — to boost Wyoming's tourism economy and benefit all Wyoming sportsmen by recognizing these special rivers," Thomas' widow, Susan Thomas, said in a statement. "This is the right time to get it done for Wyoming."

The Wyoming Range bill leaves 44,700 acres of contested leases in the Wyoming Range in the hands of the Forest Service, but conservation groups could buy the leases back if the bill passes, said Tom Reed, a spokesman for Trout Unlimited and Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range.

According to U.S. Geological Survey estimates, the total of accessible oil and gas on the 1.2 million acres would be enough to satisfy the nation's natural-gas needs for about 25 days and the nation's oil needs for less than a day.

The bill also includes legislation that would set aside more than 2 million acres in nine states as wilderness.

The vote set up as an early showdown for the new Congress, with majority Democrats assembling more than enough votes to overcome GOP stalling tactics.

Republicans complained that Democrats did not allow amendments on the massive bill, which calls for the largest expansion of wilderness protection in 25 years. But Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and other Democrats said the bill — a holdover from last year — was carefully written and included measures sponsored by both Republicans and Democrats.

Wyoming Sens. John Barrasso and Mike Enzi voted in favor.

Reid said about half the bills in the lands package were sponsored by Republicans. Most had been considered for more than a year.

"Today is a great day for America's public lands," said the bill's sponsor, Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M. "This big, bipartisan package of bills represents years of work by senators from many states, and both parties, in cooperation with local communities, to enhance places that make America so special."

The bill's chief opponent, Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., denounced what he called Democratic bullying tactics.

"I am disappointed the Senate majority leader has refused to allow senators the opportunity to improve, amend or eliminate any of the questionable provisions in his omnibus lands bill," Coburn told fellow senators.

Coburn and several other Republicans complained that the bill was loaded with pet projects and prevented development of oil and gas on federal lands, which they said would deepen the nation's dependence on foreign oil.