

'Temporary setback' for Wyo Range bill



A pair of young pronghorn hustle across a ditch against the backdrop of the snow-covered Wyoming Range peaks north of Pinedale recently. Thousands of big game animals in Sublette County are currently making their annual migration north to higher elevation summer ranges.

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CHEYENNE -- The Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, which contains protections for the Wyoming Range, failed in the U.S. House on Wednesday. But sportsmen's groups predict the bill ultimately will pass.

"This is a temporary setback," said Tom Reed, a spokesman for Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range and Trout Unlimited.

The bill failed to receive the two-thirds majority vote needed to pass.

The vote was 282-144.

Under a majority rule, the bill would have been approved, Reed noted.

"Over the past 25 years, this is the most significant bill for wildlife and fisheries habitat protection," he said.

The bill would set aside 1.2 million acres of the Wyoming Range from new oil and gas development in an effort to protect the region's fishing and hunting resources.

Wyoming Congresswoman Cynthia Lummis said she voted against the bill because U.S. House rules did not allow any amendments to the bill.

Wyoming Senators Mike Enzi and John Barrasso voted for the bill when it passed the Senate.

The 1,200-page bill, Lummis said, is a compilation of 177 bills, including 100 that never have been considered before by the U.S. House. The package costs between \$8 billion to \$10 billion, she said.

Wednesday's vote was a procedural matter that required a two-thirds total to pass the bill.

"What that means is the bill will come back before the House under a different rule that requires only a majority," Lummis said. "I suspect there will be a majority sufficient to pass the bill."

Because of the U.S. House rule, Lummis said she will not be able to vote solely on the Wyoming Range bill. Therefore, she said, she will vote no on the package.

Lummis said she made her position clear during her campaign last fall and afterward that she could not support the bill without amendments to limit the area to the Wyoming Range.

"It is called the Wyoming Range but it restricts in perpetuity access to a much, much larger area than the Wyoming Range alone," Lummis said.

The bill now includes the Wyoming Range, the Salt Range, Commissary Ridge and the Gros Ventre Range, she said.

Another amendment she wanted to present would have restricted oil and gas drilling on the Wyoming Range for 20 years, rather than in perpetuity.

If drilling technology has advanced in 20 years to the point that horizontal drilling will not present any surface impact, the next generation of leaders might want to develop the natural gas, she said.

With those two amendments, she said she would vote for the bill.

Lummis said she has met with a number of groups, including the Sublette and Lincoln County commissioners, representatives of sportsmen's groups and livestock producers to discuss the bill.

She also visited with Susan Thomas, widow of the late Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., who sponsored the Wyoming Range bill.

"I have been a good listener," she said.

The vote disappointed Walt Gasson of the Wyoming Wildlife Federation.

"Over the long haul I'm as optimistic as I've ever been," Gasson added. "This bill is going to pass and I can guarantee that the organization I represent isn't going to rest until it passes."

Gasson disagreed with Lummis on the size of the designated restricted area.

"Anything less than what we've got on the table right now, I think that's going to be a problem," he said. "I think the line is in an appropriate place right now and less than that is simply playing on people's fears.

"With all due respect to Representative Lummis, we disagree on this and that's OK."

Mike Burd, representing the United Steelworkers Local of Rock Springs, said the vote in the U.S. House was promising.

"Personally, I was a little bit disappointed with our representative," Burd said, referring to Lummis' vote. "Hopefully she will have time to reconsider."

The union members are trona miners who are in favor of a more balanced and slower approach to the extraction of minerals, he said, and have been supporting the bill for four or five years.

"There are places that are really special and should be set aside so we can enjoy the Wyoming lifestyle and outdoor activities," Burd said.

Tom Patricelli, executive director of the Campaign for the Snake Headwaters, said the Snake Headwaters bill, which is part of the package, was the last bill Thomas introduced in the Senate before he died.

Wild and scenic designation for these rivers "will not only preserve the precious natural resources but also will boost Wyoming's tourism-based economy and help outfitters and small business owners weather these tough economic times," Patricelli said in a media release.

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