

Wyden: Add Oregon wilderness

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by: The Sandy Post Editorial Board

WASHINGTON — Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden on Thursday called for setting aside 160,000 acres near Mount Hood and the Columbia River Gorge as wilderness.

Wyden, a Democrat who is up for re-election this year, said he was proposing the Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act to preserve the wild nature of federal land near where the explorers traveled, as well as enhance recreational opportunities.

The plan would nearly double the amount of wilderness in Mount Hood National Forest, which now has more than 180,000 acres of wilderness. It would also designate portions of four rivers that flow down Mount Hood under the national Wild and Scenic River System.

"For the millions of current visitors to Mount Hood and the Columbia Gorge, and for the millions more who will follow, the time has come to prepare for our future and protect these cherished lands," Wyden said.

Wyden's plan caught at least one Oregon congressman off-guard. Republican Rep. Greg Walden, whose district includes more than half the land included in Wyden's proposal, said he knew nothing about it until contacted by a reporter.

"My personal reaction is, this is out of the blue," Walden said. "I don't know if he worked with anybody else in the delegation."

Wyden's chief of staff, Josh Kardon, said Wyden was circulating the proposal in draft form Thursday and had not submitted a bill.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., welcomed the proposal, saying he has long believed in an aggressive approach to wilderness designations in Oregon, one of the most heavily forested states in the nation.

"Mount Hood is a great place to start," said Blumenauer, whose district would include nearly 40 percent of the proposed wilderness area.

Still, with Republicans in control of Congress, the measure's future is far from certain, Blumenauer and others said. Republican leaders in the House are generally skeptical of the wilderness designation, calling it an extreme measure that would halt virtually all logging or road building and severely limit economic activity.

Wyden said he expects opposition, but hopes to enlist Oregon Sen. Gordon Smith and other Republicans to support the plan.

Environmentalists praised Wyden's plan, which would be the first new wilderness designation in the Mount Hood region since creation of the Mark O. Hatfield Wilderness and other wilderness areas in 1984.

Michael Lang, conservation director for the Friends of the Columbia Gorge, said many people assume — incorrectly — that the forested cliffs around the Gorge waterfalls are safe from logging.

"But they aren't," he said. Wyden's proposal "protects significant parts of this national treasure as wilderness," Lang said.

Wyden's plan, which he expects to introduce this spring, would add 65,000 acres to the Mount Hood Wilderness; 36,200 acres to the Hatfield Wilderness; 34,900 acres to the Salmon-Huckleberry Wilderness; and 23,600 acres to the Badger Creek Wilderness.

The plan also would designate as wild and scenic 14.9 miles of the East Fork Hood River; 9 miles of the Zigzag River; 8.3 miles of Eagle Creek; and 4.7 miles of the Middle Fork Hood River.

Martha Bennett, executive director of the Columbia River Gorge Commission, said she hoped Wyden's proposal would take into account concerns about visitors "loving Mount Hood to death," a frequent lament in the region.

"The only way to keep it wilderness is to manage the use," she said.