

THE OMNIBUS PUBLIC LANDS MANAGEMENT ACT

The 110th Congress adjourned without taking up the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act of 2008. This legislation is comprised of nearly 150 broadly supported, bipartisan bills that would preserve key components of America's natural heritage and provide important economic benefits to struggling local economies. Congress should ensure that the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act is a priority in 2009.

PRESERVING AMERICA'S HERITAGE

The omnibus public lands act would protect close to two million acres of wilderness in eight states, including such American treasures as the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California, Oregon's Mt. Hood, and Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. This would be the greatest expansion of the National Wilderness Preservation System in 15 years, and would forever preserve these important American icons for the benefit of future generations.

Other key provisions would establish a 26-million-acre national conservation system, preserve over a million acres of Wyoming for hunting and fishing, protect hundreds of miles of free-flowing rivers in six states, and designate numerous new National Scenic Trails, Natural Historic Sites, and, National Heritage Areas across the United States.

A single measure in the omnibus lands act is strongly opposed by conservation groups. This measure could allow a road to be built within Alaska's Izembek National Wildlife Refuge. It is unfortunate that the Izembek provision—that could result in de-designation of federally protected wilderness—is included in a package with so many wilderness protection measures. The proposed road, a pet project of the Alaska congressional delegation, would adversely affect an internationally significant wetlands complex which is critically important habitat for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds that rely on the Refuge's eelgrass beds to nest, rest, and feed.

BI-PARTISAN SUPPORT

The Omnibus Public Lands Act of 2008 was a broadly supported, bipartisan bill that included measures introduced by 53 Senators (27 Democratic, 25 Republican, and one Independent) and 75 Representatives (39 Democratic and 36 Republican). Virtually all of the pro-wilderness measures included have strong local support and many are the result of years of local collaboration and consensus building. Most measures have broad bipartisan support and little to no opposition.

The bills in this legislation represent the normal legislative output during the span of a Congress. In other years, such bills, would have been taken up and passed by the Senate by unanimous consent. In the 110th Congress, the routine consideration public lands legislation was interrupted by senatorial holds, necessitating an omnibus package to provide for the more efficient consideration of the legislation.

WILDERNESS DESIGNATION BRING JOBS AND DOLLARS TO LOCAL ECONOMIES

The wilderness and other conservation designations in the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act will provide important economic benefits for rural economies across the United States. Passing this legislation will help local communities by providing new sources of revenue and support.

By providing jobs in recreation and tourism, increasing local property values, and providing attractive places for residents to live and work, wilderness designation provides significant benefits to local economies. On average, each 10,000 acres of wilderness designated provides six new jobs in local communities.¹ Nationwide, outdoor recreation contributes \$730 billion to the American economy, while supporting 6.5 million jobs.²

The good jobs, increased property values, and healthy landscapes are important reasons why numerous local businesses and Chambers of Commerce support the wilderness and other conservation provisions within the omnibus lands act. In West Virginia, for example, over 100 local businesses support the Wild Monongahela Act. The Wyoming Range Legacy Act is supported by 35 local businesses, as well as the Wyoming Tourism Board, Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce, and Wyoming Outfitters and Guides Association. In the words of the Yucca Valley Chamber of Commerce, wilderness and other protective measures are “crucial for maintaining a healthy economy” in rural areas.

The wilderness and conservation measures within the omnibus act will have only negligible effects on oil and gas production because the areas protected are not priorities for production. The Wyoming Range Legacy Act, for example, will have no significant effect on oil and gas production because the federal land management agencies have no plans to issue new oil and gas leases in the next decade.³ Meanwhile, the nearby Jonah and Pinedale Anticline oil fields continue to produce significant oil and gas and hold more than 25 times more oil and gas than the Wyoming Range.

¹ Loomis, J.B. and Richardson, R. 2001. Economic values of the U.S. Wilderness system: Research evidence to date and questions for the future. *Int'l. Journal of Wilderness* 7(1): 31-34.

² Outdoor Industry Foundation. 2006. *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: A \$730 Billion Contribution to the U.S. Economy*. Available at <http://www.outdoorindustry.org/>.

³ Congressional Budget Office. 2008. Cost estimate for the Wyoming Range Legacy Act.