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EDITORIAL

A Bill Whose Time Has Come

Maybe, just maybe, with a little nudge from Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other House Democrats, Congress will at last push a historic omnibus public lands bill over the finish line, perhaps as early as Wednesday.

The bill establishes three new national park units and protects more than 1,000 miles of “wild and scenic” rivers and streams from development. But what makes it a memorable piece of legislation are provisions giving permanent wilderness status — the highest layer of protection the law can confer — to two million acres of public land in nine states ranging from California and Oregon to Virginia.

This would be the largest addition to the nation’s store of protected wilderness — now about 107 million acres — since 1994

The bill has broad bipartisan support in Congress and the country at large. But after surviving a threatened filibuster in the Senate in January, it failed by two votes in the House — partly for complex parliamentary reasons and partly because some House members felt that not all of the measure’s moving parts (the bill is really 160 smaller bills wrapped into one big one) had been properly vetted in committee.

This is a defect that afflicts many omnibus bills. It is also true, however, that every single provision in the bill is the product of long and intense negotiations stretching back years on the state and local level — the product, that is, of consensus.

The measure is now back in the House after a second trip through the Senate. It has been improved each step of the way. Its most controversial provision — for a road through a wildlife refuge in Alaska — has been revised for the better; it now gives the secretary of the interior the power to veto the road if he feels it would cause excessive environmental damage.

The House should honor all this work, as well as the country’s need for protected open space, by approving this worthy measure.