



New Wilderness Bill speeds ahead first week of 2009

U.S. Senate vote may arrive as soon as Friday

By Catherine Billey
 Mammoth Times Staff Writer

A successful Senate cloture vote on Jan. 11 ensured that the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (S.22), a package of public lands bills including Mammoth Lakes Community Water District legislation and the Eastern Sierra Northern San Gabriel Wilderness bill, will move speedily toward passage at the top of the new year.

Introduced on Jan. 7 by Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, it is similar to a bill that died in the last session of Congress in October, 2008. S.22 includes protections for close to two million acres nationwide and 472,804 acres of California federal public lands. The cloture vote, taken during a rare Sunday (Jan. 11) legislative session, limits consideration of the measure and blocked a potential filibuster.

"Today's successful cloture vote in the Senate brings my two district land and water measures closer to final passage," said Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-Santa Clarita) of the 66 to 12 vote. "Both bills were crafted over several years, in a bipartisan spirit, and represent a sensible approach to land and water rights."

"We now know that the bill is going to pass; it's just a matter of when," said Sally Miller, Senior Field Representative for the Wilderness Society, unable to contain her excitement in a phone call with the Times on Jan. 12. She believed the bill could pass by the end of the week.

"We are very excited that this bill, which reflects years of hard work on the part of so many people, is close to passage," Miller said. "We're particularly grateful to the tremendous bipartisan work of Congressman Buck McKeon and Sen. Barbara Boxer and their staff."

"Senator Barbara Boxer and I worked tirelessly to find a practical solution to preserving the wild heritage of the 25th Congressional District," McKeon said in an issued statement. "This legislation will increase economic development by preserving land treasured by many and



Glass Creek Meadow, proposed under the Wilderness Bill (S. 22) as Owens River Headwaters Wilderness. PHOTO BY JOHN DITTLI

enhancing recreational opportunities."

According to Nathan Britton of Senator Barbara Boxer's office in an email to the Times, the only changes to the bill have been minor boundary alterations, undertaken in consultation with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and Southern California Edison, to prevent interference with utility or water infrastructure.

The three California provisions of the bill would protect public lands and rivers in Riverside County, the Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Mountains and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks by designating new Wilderness areas and Wild and Scenic Rivers, according to the the California Wild Heritage Campaign.

"The Riverside and Sequoia-Kings Canyon bills passed the House of Representatives during the last Congress, and the Eastern Sierra/San Gabriel bill was approved by a key Senate committee last fall."

Opposition to last year's legislation primarily came from the Advocates for Access to Public Lands (AAPL).

"And it still does," confirmed Dick Noles, AAPL co-founder, by phone on Jan. 8. "Our principal and major concern is that the boundaries of the Boxer bill bring it right down to the highways and it is intended to eliminate the extraction

of natural resources."

Noles said AAPL also objects to the cherry-stemming of 100 miles of roads within the boundaries of designated wilderness. "Our argument will continue to be that this does not meet the intent of the 1964 Wilderness Act. We are

losing access to five major Bighorn Sheep management areas that will go behind wilderness, per expert testimony from biologist Verne Bleich, who was in charge of the Bighorn Sheep management program for years here."

The bill's primary Senate opponent is Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.). He and other Republicans believe it will prevent development of oil and gas on federal lands, which in their view will deepen the nation's dependence on foreign oil.

"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 legislators, according to the Associated Press.

But environmental groups say the bill sets the right tone for the new Congress. "The sponsors of these bills, along with Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), have been great champions for wilderness protection in our state," said Ryan Henson, Policy Director for the California Wilderness Coalition. "We appreciate their steadfast effort to pass these important wilderness bills this Congress, ensuring a lasting legacy for the many people who use and enjoy these wild lands."

See "WILDERNESS" Page 7

Popular snow play area under review

By Catherine Billey
 Mammoth Times Staff Writer

How should the town handle the popular but ungoverned snow play area on Minaret Boulevard just below Main Street?

That was the question facing the Tourism and Recreation Commission on Jan. 6, though no decision could be made in the absence of legal representation.

"It's become a de facto play area," T&R Director Danna Stroud said, but it's not officially recognized, she added.

That may not be the case in print, argued Mark Deeds, who represents owner Mammoth Crossing Development, but many establishments in town refer their guests there. "It is unofficially the de facto snow play



MAMMOTH TIMES PHOTOS/SUSAN MORNING
 The hill where Minaret crosses Main is a favorite place for families to go sledding.

area in town," he said.

"I initiated the whole process because in the Draft Parks Master Recreation plan under Public/Private partnerships, it emphasizes the collaborative relationships with

See "SNOWPLAY" Page 9

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 from Inyo National Forest



WILDERNESS continued from front page

S.22 has been endorsed by both Mono County and the Mammoth Town Council, with broad local support among residents, community leaders such as Byng Hunt, Hap Hazard and Skip Harvey, and the Mammoth Mountain Ski Area. If passed, it will call for the largest expansion of wilderness protection in 25 years and ensure the highest form of protection for some of the nation's most beloved remaining wild places, including:

- The Eastern Sierra and Northern San Gabriel Wild Heritage Act. Nearly 450,000 acres of wilderness and four wild and scenic rivers totaling 73 miles near Santa Clarita and in the magnificent Eastern Sierra, including the White Mountains.

- The California Desert and Mountain Heritage Act. Approximately 190,000 acres of pristine and ecologically sensitive land in Riverside County as wilderness, including parts of Joshua Tree National Park, and four wild and scenic rivers totaling 31 miles.

- Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Wilderness Act of 2008. Close to 70,000 acres of wilderness, including the new John Krebs Wilderness, named for the former Congressman and conservationist who worked to protect these lands in the Mineral King Valley.

Outside California, the bill will confer the highest level of protection on land in Oregon's Mount Hood, Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, Zion National Park in Utah, and more.

"The passage of the lands package will guarantee that these precious areas and streams are protected in perpetuity

for future generations and that Americans from throughout the nation will forever be able to hike, hunt, fish, paddle, climb and otherwise enjoy more of America's great wild gifts," said Steve Evans, Conservation Director of Friends of the River.

Water District included in S. 22

"I was particularly pleased by the inclusion of the Mammoth Community Water District measure, which empowers community leaders in Mammoth to use their natural water resources in ways most beneficial to the people living there," said Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon in a press release.

According to his office, the Mammoth Community Water District occupied certain lands prior to 1987 that were administered by the Forest Service through a special use permit.

The law at that time allowed the District to acquire 25 acres, but directed that 12 acres of the land could only be used for the purposes for which it had been used prior to the time of the conveyance, principally the storage of materials and for oxidation ponds. Those 12 acres are no longer needed for storage but current law (PL 97-465) forbids the District from using it in an alternative and economically viable way.

"Local control is still the best approach for land and water usage rights," McKeon said in a press release. "The town of Mammoth and Mono County have witnessed a steady, yearly population increase, compelling the need to release the 12 acres of land currently restricted under existing law. My water district measure will allow Mammoth to accommodate for their growing economic needs."



Bonnie Lake in the Hoover Wilderness is part of the Wilderness Bill.

PHOTO BY JOHN DITTLI

News Briefs**Planning priorities**

Town council voted on Jan. 7 to approve the Community Development Department recommendation that the town place the North Village and East OSSC district studies on hold to focus on completing open policy issues, including PAOT, community benefits and incentive zoning. "Basically, it's just to complete the body of policy work that establishes criteria to evaluate applications before we consider them," Mayor Wendy Sugimura told the Times.

IRS begins 2009 filing season

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) kicked off the 2009 tax filing season by announcing a number of new steps to help financially distressed taxpayers with their tax obligations. The IRS is offering added flexibility for missed payments, additional review for offers in compromise on home values, prevention of offer in compromise defaults, postponement of collection actions and expedited levy releases. For more info, go to www.irs.gov.

Adopt-A-Hydrant

The Mammoth Lakes Fire Department asks that each neighborhood routinely keep their fire hydrants clear of snow. When maintained the amount of work is minimal and may be shared by several neighbors. If needed in an emergency it is important that hydrants be free of snow. If the location of your nearest hydrant isn't apparent contact the Fire Department at (760) 934-2300.

Drawing Class at Cerro Coso Bishop

Cerro Coso Community College will offer a Spring Term Drawing Class at the Bishop campus, will start on Jan. 21. For more information contact Deborah Lurie (Instructor) (760) 932-7204 or Cerro Coso College, (760) 872-1565. Register online at www.cerrococo.edu by Friday Jan. 16

Danielson promoted

Ana Danielson has been promoted as of Jan. 1 from Senior Librarian to Branch Support Librarian, which means she will now be able to work with all the branches of Mono County.

Disaster assistance available for small businesses

Small, non-farm businesses in Alpine, El Dorado, Inyo, Lassen, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Placer, San Bernardino, and Sierra County may now apply for low-interest disaster loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration to offset economic losses caused by drought beginning Jan. 1, 2008. For more information, call (800) 659-2955, e-mail disastercustomerservice@sba.gov or visit www.sba.gov/services/disasterassistance.

California orders furlough of state workers

The state announced last month that California public servants will be furloughed two Fridays a month and lose 10 percent in pay, starting Feb. 6, 2009. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's furloughs aim to save the state more than \$1 billion in an effort to cut a \$40 billion budget deficit and avoid running out of cash.

State employee unions argue that the governor's plan is unconstitutional, and their lawyers have taken the governor and the state to court. Sacramento Superior Court Judge Patrick Marlette will hear final arguments in the case on Jan. 29.

Visitor operation statistics for November

Vacation planner fulfillment was down 69% (-1,982), e-mail requests were up 23% (+36), total web visits (not unique visits) were up 45% (+27,926), incoming phone calls were down 28% (-526), and walk-ins to the Welcome Center were down 23% (-893).

Horizon Air Flight Facts

The Tourism and Recreation Department has created Fly to Mammoth - Flight Facts, a two-page handout that covers everything from dates and times of operation, baggage allowance, the policy for bad weather (the aircraft will not be re-directed to Bishop or Reno), how to check flight arrival and departure status online and how to get to and from Mammoth Yosemite Airport. Log onto www.visitmammoth.com/mammothair to download Flight Facts.



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