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Local Sports

HRV Athletics
Youth/Community
Wind Sports
Sidelines
HRV Schedules

Lifestyle

Entertainment
Opinions
Letters to Editor
Obituaries

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Hearing puts wilderness bill in doubt



Submitted photo

Construction crews install the Vista Express last week, Mount Hood Meadows fifth high-speed quad chair. The four-person chair is capable of speeds of up to 1,200 feet per minute.

By CHRISTIAN KNIGHT

News staff writer
 September 24

Jay Ward just wanted to get out of his wool suit. The conservation director from the Oregon Natural Resources Council (ONRC) had just endured hours of testimony at a Sept. 9 congressional hearing, which for the most part, suffocated any hopes that the Sen. Ron Wyden-sponsored Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Protection Act of 2004 would protect anything this year.

"It (the wilderness bill) was always a long shot for this year," Ward said from a cell phone in his Washington, D.C. hotel room. "It's always disappointing to think something as popular as protecting Mount Hood might not happen this year. But we're still hopeful that the people who want to do something good for the mountain could still do it."

The hopes of Ward, the ONRC and other conservation

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groups fell specifically during the testimony of Mark Rey, the Undersecretary for the Natural Resources and Environment, a division of the United States Department of Agriculture, which oversees the United States National Forest Service.

He is the top manager of 192,000,000 acres of public lands, including 144 national forests and 19 national grasslands.

Without Rey's approval of the bill, wilderness protection on Mount Hood stands little chance of surviving Congress.

"It shouldn't surprise anybody that Mark Rey opposes wilderness," Ward said. "It's no surprise that the Forest Service and timber industry oppose wilderness. We expected it from the Forest Service and from Secretary Rey."

Rey criticized the bill for being too aggressive and too innovative.

"First," he reported. "The areas proposed as wilderness would limit the existing array of developed and dispersed recreation activities as well as create difficulties in meeting total recreation demand by forcing displacement of non-wilderness users to fewer acres of non-wilderness land."

His report continued to question the prudence of establishing a mountain biking zone within a wilderness area (Hood-PDX). He didn't like how close some sections of proposed wilderness were to roads, clearcuts and powerlines. And he specifically didn't like the effect the bill would have on Mount Hood Meadows and Cooper Spur Ski Area's plans to expand, which for Dave Riley, general manager of Mount Hood Meadows, is a good thing.

Mount Hood Meadows has owned a National Forest Service-issued permit to expand Cooper Spur Ski Area by 16 times its current size - from 75 acres to 1,350 acres - since it purchased the ski area in 2001. (This expansion is contingent upon a master plan, which Meadows has not yet submitted to the Forest Service.)

Those 1,350 acres lay within the 4,000 acres of winter recreation land Sen. Wyden would like to turn into wilderness.

If that happens, Cooper Spur expansion doesn't. For now, Cooper Spur's expansion plans involve the basic additions to ski areas. More lifts, more trails and maybe another lodge, Riley says.

"We believe that a very small percentage of this forest has been allocated for the purpose of downhill skiing," Riley said. "In the Pacific Northwest three-tenths of one percent of National Forest land is devoted to skiing. On Mount Hood National Forest it's one-tenth of one percent

that's devoted. So taking away land for downhill skiing does not seem like good policy to us without adding skiable terrain elsewhere, especially considering the demand for the sport and the public good and enjoyment it creates."

Riley is referring to the 11,000 acres Mount Hood National Forest has permitted for skiing compared to the 1.1-million-acre forest.

According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring Results for the Mount Hood National Forest, released this June, downhill skiing is Mount Hood's most popular activity, accounting for 25 percent of all primary activity in the forest.

By public enjoyment and public good, he means the 434,000 skiers, who visited Meadows and Cooper Spur last year, creating 1,000 jobs and a \$4.5 million payroll, 75 percent of which goes to Hood River County residents. (Meadows was the state's second most visited ski area, next to Mount Bachelor.)

"The legislation is not designed to affect current ski areas," said Sen. Wyden's chief of staff Josh Kardin. "If we need to make adjustments to maintain the proper environment for the ski areas on Mount Hood, of course we'll work with the operators."

Ralph Bloemers is a lawyer who has volunteered with the Sierra Club to represent those who are dependent on the Crystal Springs Watershed for its water.

He says the Cooper Spur expansion area would affect more than 1,000 acres of the 4,900-acre watershed and would tax an already over-taxed mountain.

"The rest of the mountain already experiences high visitation," he said. "The more development, the more you increase the overall access to the mountain and the impact."

Mount Hood National Forest might already be feeling the pressure of being one of a handful of metro-forests, those situated close to major cities.

According to the National Visitor Use Monitoring Survey, released this June, it attracts five million visitors per year and is the eighth most visited forest in the nation. Its four ski resorts amount to the most in the nation and because of that, its recreational supply, says Bloemers, far outweighs its demand.

"Thirteen percent of the mountain above 4,600 feet is developed recreation," he said.

Timberline Ski Area, which averaged 273,700 visits throughout the last decade, endorsed the first draft proposal of the wilderness protection act and maintains

its support of the revised Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Protection Act of 2004.

In a letter to Wyden dated March 30, Timberline President Jeff Kohnstamm wrote: "... we understand and applaud your initiative to increase the number of acres on Mt. Hood to be permanently protected as Wilderness, and we generally support the Lewis and Clark Wilderness Proposal. It is forward thinking and bold vision, and good for Oregon ..."

Wyden's bill has little affect on Timberline's 456 acres of permitted use. The Mount Hood Wilderness currently sets the northern and western boundaries for Timberline. The proposed wilderness would cinch the western boundary a little tighter and create an additional one on the east. But it would leave Timberline's 40-year plan to build one additional chairlift and expand onto an additional 62 acres in tact, despite wilderness expansion.

"At that point Timberline in our view will be fully developed and built out to our master plan," said Timberline spokesman Jon Tullis. "That essentially means that one third of our total acreage will be developed for downhill skiing. The remaining acreage (990 acres) is treed or snowfield."

Still, Kohnstamm's letter of endorsment was cautious in tone. "Timberline is one of those rare places that strives and appears to remain the same, and while we are successful at this, the growth in visitors to the lodge and the mountain in general has grown significantly over the years. At Timberline Lodge alone, we see an average of 1.9 million annual visitors ..."

"There are concerns with managing activities on adjacent lands, Tullis said. "Such as allowing the Forest Service to uphold wilderness values and still allow permitted activities on recreational lands, such as noise and air pollution."

ONRC's Ward believes wilderness can exist near areas of development.

"If the wild character is maintained, then you can have wilderness," he said. If we tried to make wilderness something that you could only view in packs of man, it would only exist on the moon." For now, he has resigned his hopes for the passage of the wilderness bill.

"We're looking at next-year strategy," Ward said.

