

HOOD RIVER NEWS

**Sen. Wyden peddles bike-friendly wilderness**

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By RaeLynn Ricarte

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden wants to create a pilot program to keep 144 miles of mountain biking trails open through a new wilderness zone on Mount Hood.

The Hood Peddlers Demonstration Experiment (Hood-PDX) was included in his formal proposal to protect more forest land on Mount Hood and in the Columbia River Gorge. Under the Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act of 2004, Wyden wants to add about 180,000 more acres of wilderness to the existing 189,200 acres.

This week he introduced the bill intended to honor the historic expedition by leaving a "legacy" for future generations.

His new plan attempts to overcome a roadblock that he immediately encountered when the idea was first floated before the public in late March.

Biking enthusiasts raised strong objections to being cut off from 160 miles of trails on Mount Hood.

In order to retain all but 14 miles of these routes, Wyden amended his original boundary lines, increasing the amount of proposed wilderness from 160,000 to the current total. Under the Wilderness Act of 1964, mechanized transport is not allowed on protected lands and not only are bicycles and baby strollers prohibited, so are the chainsaws needed to efficiently clear away downed trees.

Wyden now wants to create the nation's first mountain bike area to be managed as wilderness.

Under the pilot program, both bikes and chainsaws would be permitted uses for 10 years, during which time Congress could make the designation permanent.

The area proposed for the experiment is 13,131 acres around Shellrock Mountain, Hell Roaring Creek and Fifteenmile Creek. Wyden has also added 11 miles of Fifteenmile Creek to the four waterways already proposed for added regulation as part of the National Wild and Scenic River System.

That list includes about 15 miles of East Fork Hood River and 4.7 miles of Middle Fork.

"A wilderness designation and additional protections for these rivers will provide real safeguards for the quality of life that we, as Oregonians, are so proud of," said Wyden.

Another big change to the latest proposal is drawing fire from some environmental groups. Wyden has incorporated a provision that allows some commercial logging in second-growth areas.

During two summits on uses of Mount Hood held by U.S. Reps. Greg Walden and Earl Blumenaur, protests were registered that unmanaged wilderness areas filled with diseased and dying trees were susceptible to fire danger that destroyed resources.

Wyden wanted to address that concern by protecting old growth trees but allowing the U.S. Forest Service to "aggressively" thin some over-crowded stands of timber. He also added a buffer zone so that communities bordering wilderness areas, like Cascade Locks and Government Camp, could take steps to protect themselves from forest fires.

On Thursday, Walden, who chairs the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, declined to comment on the changes in Wyden's plan. He wants more time to study the new maps once they are provided to his office and an opportunity to read the proposal in its entirety. The summits hosted by Walden and Blumenaur in 2003 and 2004 each drew crowds of about 300 people.

Walden plans to compare his notes from public testimony with Wyden's vision and then confer with Blumenaur to ensure that all needs identified for Mount Hood are being addressed.

"This will really be our first look at exactly what he is proposing and we will have an opportunity to evaluate the pros and the cons of it," Walden said.