

## **Mt. Hood wilderness plan gains ground**

By Associated Press

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TIMBERLINE LODGE, Ore. -- A proposal to create the first new wilderness areas on Mount Hood since 1984 gained momentum Monday when Republican Rep. Greg Walden offered his guarded support for preserving more of the mountain.

The plan is already supported by Democratic members of Oregon's congressional delegation, who say it has a chance of passage in an election year -- historically the time when many wilderness areas are created.

Walden, speaking at the second Mount Hood Summit put on by congressmen in nine months, told a gathering of outdoor enthusiasts, ski resort developers and timber industry representatives that he favors some preservation on Mount Hood.

"What I take away from this summit is that passion has gotten stronger," he said. "The pressures to do something are strong. The need to do something is real."

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, released a draft proposal March 25 to expand four existing wilderness areas on Mount Hood and in the Columbia River Gorge, enshrining an additional 160,553 acres with permanent protection from logging and development.

Walden's endorsement was seen as necessary to pass any such plan in the Republican-controlled Congress, said Jay Ward, conservation director with the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

After hearing comments Monday -- with ideas that ranged from charging visitors to view wildflowers to allowing logging to prevent wildfires -- Walden said it was clear that some safeguards against encroaching development are needed.

Walden, however, did not endorse any specific plan and said he would not promise to introduce legislation in the next few weeks.

Wyden has called his idea the Lewis & Clark Wilderness Proposal, honoring the bicentennial of the explorers' trek across the country beginning in 1804.

### **The plan would:**

-- Extend the boundaries of the Mount Hood Wilderness Area that includes the Timberline ski resort and the mountain's 11,245-foot peak to include lava beds and forest land.

-- Protect cliffs and rim-rock formations visible from Interstate I-84 in the Mark O. Hatfield Wilderness area in the Columbia River Gorge.

-- Expand the Salmon Huckleberry Wilderness into old growth hemlock forests south of the mountain.

-- Expand Badger Creek Wilderness east of the mountain, known for brilliant fall colors and seen as important transitional habitat between the wet western side of the mountain and arid high desert to

the east.

-- Designate sections of four rivers on the mountain as wild and scenic.

Wyden's proposal would make conservationists winners in some long-festering land-use issues.

The Salmon Huckleberry expansion would prevent the logging of 700 acres around the south fork of Eagle Creek, a flashpoint in battles between tree-sitting environmentalists and loggers in the late 1990s.

Expansion of the wilderness area north of the mountain could halt plans by Mount Hood Meadows for a destination ski resort at Cooper Spur.

A statement from Mount Hood Meadows released Monday said of Wyden's proposal "this is not the most effective regulatory framework to care for this great mountain."

The proposal also alarmed some mountain biking enthusiasts, who said they feared wilderness designation could prevent necessary maintenance on backcountry trails.

The U.S. Forest Service estimates that 4.1 million people visit the existing Mount Hood Wilderness Area every year, making it the eighth most visited wilderness area in the country.

Wyden's proposal would create the first new wilderness area in Oregon since the preservation in 2000 of Steens Mountain in southeastern Oregon. In 1996, Congress created the Opal Creek Wilderness east of Salem.