

Wyden floats idea of nearly doubling wilderness areas on Hood, in gorge

The senator says he wants "everybody's input" before drafting a measure that would include wild and scenic rivers

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by Michelle Cole and Joe Rojas-Burke

Protected wilderness on Mount Hood could nearly double in size if a proposal by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden gains traction in the nation's Capitol.

The Oregon Democrat said Thursday that he's prepared to introduce legislation designating an additional 160,000 acres of congressionally protected wilderness within the Mount Hood National Forest and Columbia River Gorge. Wyden also wants to bring four stretches of rivers, totaling 36.9 miles, into the national Wild and Scenic River System.

Conservationists have fought for years to secure additional protections for Mount Hood, which provides captivating views, year-round recreation, millions of tourist dollars and clean water for nearby communities. An estimated 5 million people visit the Mount Hood National Forest each year, bringing with them problems that plague other urban forests: crime, crowds and pollution.

"I get out and listen to folks, and what I hear again and again is that you've got millions of people going to Mount Hood and to the gorge, and millions more to come," Wyden said. "This is a treasure that people want to see protected."

Though Wyden's proposal is titled the Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act of 2004, the senator said he did not have a specific timeline. He also said he would not introduce legislation before "getting everybody's input."

"I want to get this done. I think it's important," Wyden said. "But I want it to get done right, and that means listening to people."

The senator's wilderness proposal surprised almost everyone Thursday.

"That's unbelievable and shocking," said Chris West, vice president of the American Forest Resource Council, a Portland-based timber industry group.

"The Mount Hood National Forest has such a small percentage of lands managed for timber," West said. "Any proposal for that much wilderness would mean additional land would be off-limits."

The Mount Hood National Forest now has about 193,000 acres of protected wilderness.

"We're excited and pleased and relieved that those areas are going to be protected," said Sandi Scheinberg, executive director of Bark, a conservation group that focuses exclusively on protecting the Mount Hood National Forest.

This "creates a place where people can experience Oregon as it was," said Rick Stoller, executive director of Mazamas, the mountaineering group.

Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., and Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski were reviewing the plan late Thursday and declined comment.

Rep. Greg Walden and chairman of the House forest and forest health subcommittee, said he wouldn't rule out wilderness protections for some areas on Mount Hood.

But Walden, R-Ore., said before legislation is drafted and voted on in Washington a conversation needs to occur that is both bipartisan and inclusive of multiple interests.

"I want to make sure that we protect that which is most pristine and deserving of protection, and recognize that there are a lot of Oregonians who want Mount Hood to be available for a lot of different purposes," Walden said.

Logging, road building, motorized vehicles and even mountain bikes are prohibited within congressionally designated wilderness.

The U.S. Forest Service is facing litigation over its decision in January not to allow kayakers and canoeists access to the headwaters of the Chattooga River, a Wild and Scenic River that runs from North Carolina through South Carolina and Georgia.

Once land is designated wilderness, or as a Wild and Scenic River, "the restrictions on that land will become significantly greater than what they are now," said Robin L. Rivett, attorney for the Pacific Legal Foundation, which frequently represents property owners in environmental lawsuits.

Rivett said increased protections on federal lands also could "significantly" affect nearby private lands.

Members of Wyden's staff said Thursday that they do not anticipate any impact on private property owners and that most recreational activities would continue unaffected.

"I credit the senator for starting the discussion," said Dave Riley, vice president and general manager for Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort and Cooper Spur Mountain Resort.

"Someone had to throw out a plan to get everybody's wheels turning," Riley said. "If you think about it, 50 years down the road, I think we're going to have to make some changes that do further protect the unique and special places, but concurrently provide for greater managed uses of recreation within the areas that have already been established in the forest plan for that use."