

Wyden finds support for Hood wilderness at 'listening' session

People at the Portland meeting urge Oregon's Democratic senator to pursue his proposal

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by Michelle Cole

Hundreds turned out Wednesday evening to encourage U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden to pursue a proposal that would nearly double the size of federally protected wilderness on Mount Hood.

The Oregon Democrat held the first of two public forums this week on his Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act, draft legislation that would designate an additional 160,000 acres of wilderness on Mount Hood and add four river segments to the federal Wild and Scenic River system.

Steve Levy was among 126 people registered to speak at Wyden's Portland session. He has hiked, climbed and skied on Mount Hood for nearly 30 years. But he stressed that the area means far more to him than a "weekend playground."

It is, Levy said, a place where he finds health, spirituality and joy. "I know this is where my ashes are going," he said.

Noting that no new wilderness has been protected in the Mount Hood National Forest in 20 years, many spoke of the growing and competing demands on a forest close to an urban area and visited by millions each year.

"Skiers proliferate on Mount Hood and cram its highways, pollute its scenery and threaten to determine the future of this --and other -- Oregon natural resources," said Rabbi Joseph Wolf, who urged Wyden to add the Roaring River Roadless Area to his Mount Hood wilderness plan.

Its huckleberries and lakes sparkled long before Lewis and Clark and await the fate of other wonders that get bought and sold, Wolf said.

Mount Hood National Forest has about 190,000 acres of congressionally designated wilderness. Though most of Wednesday's crowd supported Wyden's plan to protect more of the forest, a few urged him to take the time to find common ground among competing interests.

For example, mountain bikes are shut out of designated wilderness areas, said Douglas Van Zandt. Losing those trails would be "a sacrifice" for mountain bikers, he said.

Dave Riley, vice president and general manager of the Mt. Hood Meadows and Cooper Spur ski areas, urged Wyden to collaborate with others who have

already begun talking about the future of Mount Hood and the Columbia River Gorge.

"Given Mount Hood's proximity to Portland, I believe it is advisable to consider wilderness expansion not in isolation, but in an analysis that also includes the elements of transportation, developed recreation, forest health and future development of adjacent communities and private lands," Riley said.

Wyden surprised many people -- including his colleagues in Oregon's congressional delegation -- when he unveiled his wilderness proposal last month. Since then, Wyden said he has spoken regularly about his plan with Republican Sen. Gordon Smith.

Conservationists have also asked Wyden to consider other Oregon lands in need of permanent wilderness protection, including 23,000 acres on Soda Mountain within the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

Whether an Oregon wilderness bill can pass in a partisan election year remains an open question, Wyden said.

"That's why I'm having these listening sessions," he said. "You're never going to get anything bipartisan done if you don't listen to people."

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