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Mount Hood wilderness plan comes complete with bike zone

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By Michelle Cole

A bill to create 177,800 more acres of protected wilderness on Mount Hood as well as the nation's first wildernesslike mountain biking zone was scheduled for introduction in the U.S. Senate today by Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden.

The Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness Act of 2004 comes on the final day before the Senate adjourns for its August recess -- and, significantly, without the stated support of Wyden's Oregon colleague, Republican Sen. Gordon Smith, who declined comment Wednesday.

Chances are slim the Hood wilderness legislation will advance this year, Wyden said Wednesday. And he acknowledged the bill won't survive the Senate without Smith's endorsement.

"Realistically, what I'd like to do is get a hearing in the fall and work with the delegation," Wyden said. "Senator Smith and I have spent a lot of time in discussions."

The Mount Hood National Forest, the eighth most-visited forest in the United States, is under pressure from increasing population and recreation demands. These factors have prompted impassioned debate about the most appropriate use and protections for an iconic landscape that also provides 40 percent of Oregonians with clean drinking water.

Wyden first floated his wilderness proposal this spring and said he has since received thousands of letters, postcards, phone calls and e-mails. Several hundred others testified at community meetings.

His bill expands the protected wilderness areas from what he originally proposed. It also contains a number of new ideas aimed at addressing recreation and community concerns, among them:

The "Mount Hood Pedaler's Demonstration Experiment" or "Hood-PDX." This 13,131-acre area includes the popular Fifteenmile Creek Trail and would receive similar protections as congressionally designated wilderness. Logging and motorized vehicles would be prohibited. But mountain biking would be allowed, as would chain saws to be used to clear trails.

A forest thinning program covering at least 62,000 acres over 10 years to produce commercial timber and enhance forest health. This allows logging in areas previously cut but prohibits the taking of stands more than 120 years old.

Fire safety buffer zones to protect the communities of Cascade Locks, Government Camp and Rowena would be created by thinning stands and removing vegetation.

A new National Commission on Urban National Forests created to identify and address issues common to national forests situated within 100 miles of a metropolitan area with at least 1 million people.

A Mt. Hood National Forest Southside Winter Recreation Area stretching between Timberline Lodge and Government Camp and around Trillium Lake, Summit Meadows and Multipor Mountain.

Mountain bikers, who were most critical about Wyden's first wilderness proposal, were pleased Wednesday with the creation of "Hood-PDX."

"This is something we'd love to see happen," said Roger Louton, a board member of the Portland United Mountain Pedalers and a member of the Oregon Mountain Bike Coalition.

Paul Thomasberg, a founding member of the Central Oregon Trail Alliance, said mountain bikers didn't get everything they wanted. "But we're 100 percent happy with the direction it's going."

Reaction from conservationists ranged from dismay to cautious support. Many groups questioned whether provisions to allow commercial logging belong in a wilderness bill.

"This bill needs to be ditched unless it's an authentic wilderness bill," said Sandi Scheinberg, executive director of Bark, a conservation group that focuses exclusively on protecting the Mount Hood National Forest.

Paul Shively, Northwest regional representative for the Sierra Club, said, "We're really excited that the senator is taking the first step toward wilderness."

But Shively and other conservationists said they would like to see the forest thinning and mountain bike provisions handled separately.

Chris West, vice president of the American Forest Resource Council, said it would be difficult for the timber industry to support the legislation.

"This is nothing more than a land grab," West said.

Oregon members of the House, whose districts lie within the Wyden proposal, were unavailable for comment Wednesday. Aides to Republican Rep. Greg Walden and Democratic Rep. Earl Blumenauer said their offices needed more time to review the legislation and accompanying maps. Democratic Rep. Darlene Hooley could not be reached for comment late Wednesday.

Although Wyden was clear the bill had little chance of passage this year, its introduction on the last day before August recess ensures that the subject of Mount Hood protections will remain before Congress. West said the legislation could become part of end-of-the-year deal making.

Michelle Cole: 503-294-5143; michellecole@news.oregonian.com