



Last modified: Wednesday, April 12, 2006 2:54 PM CDT  
Hoover Wilderness Compromise, Part 2

Give and take leads to legislation

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*This is the second of two articles on the Hoover Wilderness Compromise and the multiple use agreement that moved forward as a part of a federal legislative act this month.*

"This is a bipartisan effort to protect the stunning Sierra landscape of snow-capped peaks, glacial valleys and forests that people all around the world associate with California. This legislation will ensure that these beautiful areas will be sustained for future generations to enjoy," California Senator Barbara Boxer said last week about a collaborative effort to protect wilderness in the Eastern Sierra. The legislation Boxer referred to was the "Eastern Sierra Rural Heritage and Economic Enhancement Act." The bill, introduced by California legislators Boxer, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Congressman Buck McKeon (whose districts are affected), would add 40,320 acres of land to the existing Hoover and Emigrant Wilderness areas, both entirely in Mono County.

"It will take an act of Congress," said those involved in the decades old give and take process that remained in a stalemate position for more years than many wanted to remember. The "proposed" Hoover and Emigrant Wilderness areas hung in a "Limboland" of sorts for federal, state, county, and local constituents so long, that management of the region finally needed agreement once and for all.

The proposed bill to protect wilderness in the area represents years of compromises and concessions by the region's biggest stakeholders. The trail to resolution has been contentious and a prolonged struggle-lasting more than two decades-between different resource management agencies and strategies, protracted wilderness designation processes, and land users' desires to access a "proposed" wilderness region only minimally enforced in the past. Included in this proposed act is the designation of almost 24 miles of the Amargosa River in the Death Valley region as a "Wild and Scenic River."

"The Eastern Sierra is home to some of the starkest, most beautiful landscape in California," Senator Feinstein said recently when the legislation was introduced in Congress. "Its silver lakes, towering peaks, and grassy meadows are environmental jewels, which should be preserved for all time."

If approved, the act will designate the Hoover and Emigrant Wilderness and Amargosa Wild and Scenic River areas as protected regions, and their management would be administered by the U.S. Forest Service (the Humboldt-Toiyabe for the Hoover and Emigrant Wilderness) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for

Amargosa.

Several groups grappled with the complexities of designating land uses within these proposed wilderness areas including the Forest Service, BLM, non-profit environmental and conservation organizations, and Mono County. There were many "processes tried in the past," Supervisor Hap Hazard said, and there were historical issues a "bad blood" to overcome to get to the new compromise. The county's new GIS (Global Imaging System) system helped, Hazard related, in drawing a more concise map with the "outside boundary only" for the controversial Hoover and Emigrant Wildernesses. This new map enabled the stakeholders to grasp what was really being "designated" and allowed the group to move beyond the previous "non-successful programs," Hazard concluded.

### The "Hazard Line"

One of the biggest stumbling blocks-or, in this case, ridges-to the Hoover Wilderness Compromise was the ridgeline along the Emigrant Wilderness and three chutes that dropped over the ridge, Hazard explained. Transitioning users from designated use areas-for snowmobiles in particular-around wilderness regions was tough at best, Hazard noted. Winter recreation seekers frequently had conflicted use patterns and for snowmobiles, blocked off chutes were like "going to Disneyland" without being able to get to the "E- ticket rides." A compromise had to be reached on appropriate areas for snowmobile use and the solitude of cross-country skiing wilderness.

The result was "the Hazard Line," and the supervisor said that he decided to take some of the heat in giving a focus and name to the touchy subject of the ridgeline boundaries. While the three chutes were lost to snowmobile use (in the compromised Area B), a trail system from Bridgeport to another Area A was created. Use in Area A will remain confined to wilderness area regulations, and electronically monitored (in real time) devices will transmit a signal to management agencies, and law enforcement will investigate for further actions.

"Everyone recognized that enforceable boundaries was the key to gaining trust" in the compromise, Hazard commented. Now, those who log on to a Web site on the region can plan a vacation (during any season) and the limits of their use and what to expect in scenic values. Hazard also stated that the ridgeline designation, the "Hazard Line," represented the legal boundaries of use and with this line in place, "would not allow for situations of accidental violations."

Hazard felt the compromise had "gained clarity," and "maximized" opportunities for the communities surrounding the recreation area. Visitors to Bridgeport can ride snowmobiles to the area from town and cross-country or backcountry enthusiasts can spend the day in peace and quiet. "Everyone came together to give up a little and gain a little."

On a happy note: While it will still take an "act of Congress" to pass this important legislation, at least the local stakeholders crafting this bill and negotiating its management (over a 20 year span of time) can take a bow for moving this forward for the people.