

## AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

### CALLING FOR A MORATORIUM ON DAMAGING PUBLIC LAND & WILDERNESS LEGISLATION

September 12, 2006

The undersigned organizations call on the conservation community to support a moratorium on bills currently pending in Congress that combine wilderness designation with harmful land and water development provisions.

This extraordinary request stems from our alarm regarding several bills detrimental to public lands heading toward fast-track passage in the U.S. Congress. Some support these bills for their wilderness designations, but the bills are laden with environmentally damaging provisions and land privatization schemes that have dire implications for future public-land and wilderness protection.

In recent years, there has been a transformation in the approach both Congress and some wilderness advocates have taken to formulating and gaining support for wilderness legislation. The new approach carries severely adverse consequences for both public lands and wilderness, and we believe the trend must be stopped now.

We ask those organizations that have been supporting these bills to recognize the danger the bills pose to public lands and join with us in opposing their passage. We ask for a moratorium on all wilderness legislation that contains non-wilderness-related provisions and special exceptions for uses inside wilderness.

#### **The price is too high**

A far cry from simple wilderness protection, the new trend—often called “*quid pro quo* wilderness”—is to insert wilderness designation into large, complex land-use development bills, offsetting wilderness protection with harmful provisions such as:

- ✍ sell-offs, even outright giveaways, of public land to local interests and developers;
- ✍ free public rights-of-way for sprawling water pipelines;
- ✍ direct conveyances of federal land (and land-sale proceeds) to states and counties;
- ✍ the formation of select groups to exercise local control over public lands;
- ✍ sanctioning motor-vehicle use, stream-poisoning, military maneuvers, and other incompatible and inappropriate uses in wilderness.

These provisions continually lower the bar on what constitutes wilderness protection; legitimize the idea that it is acceptable to sell off or give away public land; entrench the

concept of trading public land in one place for wilderness designation elsewhere; and undermine the larger struggle to protect all public land.

### **A multiple-bill train wreck**

There are four bills pending in Congress that fit the *quid pro quo* mold, and which may end up combined for fast-track passage, with or without other wilderness bills:

(1) White Pine County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act of 2006, S. 3772

(2) Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act, HR 3603

(3) Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2006, S. 3636, HR 5769

(4) Owyhee Initiative Implementation Act of 2006, S. 3794

Just these four bills combined would sell off, trade, or give away more than 80,000 acres of public land; give away free public right-of-way for water pipelines and untold acres for other sprawl-enabling utility infrastructure; and release some 400,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas.

Other bills include smaller (or no) trade-offs, but nevertheless create wilderness areas with special exceptions that allow inappropriate and damaging uses. One bill would codify an exchange of public National Forest land formulated by private parties to settle a private dispute.

Whether some or all, passed individually or together, and in whatever combination, these bills are dismantling public land protection and undermining the spirit and intent of the Wilderness Act.

### **When the people lead the leaders will follow**

Since last fall, both the Bush Administration and the majority party in Congress have floated many proposals for large-scale privatization of public land, including schemes to sell 300,000 acres of “excess” land in our National Forests, auction off public land in the West, and sell National Parks. The public outcry has been swift and resounding—prompting even anti-federal-land ideologues in Congress to disavow the proposals.

The conservation and wilderness communities were united in opposing these privatization schemes. Yet *quid pro quo* bills are part of the same phenomenon and would accomplish the same result—divesting the public of public lands, treating them as an asset to be liquidated for the benefit of local and special interests.

## **It's the worst possible time for fast-track wilderness**

The current administration and Congress are promoting the most environmentally damaging policies the U.S. has seen in years. Public land liquidation and privatization are at the heart of their agenda.

When Congress re-convenes in September for a hasty wrap-up before the elections, there is a strong possibility that several individual privatization-development-wilderness bills could be thrown into one or more mammoth omnibus bills. Good bills may be thrown in with the bad to neutralize opposition and to try to belatedly burnish the green credentials of the party in power.

At the same time, there is a strong potential for change in the makeup of Congress—less than two months from now. This is not a mere naïve hope, but a possibility that is under very serious discussion.

The only prudent approach at this pivotal time is to abandon support for these severely compromised proposals. We must re-unify as a principled, public-interest movement, and fight for true wilderness and public land protection in the new year.

## **Rededicating ourselves to protecting public land**

The ongoing and intensifying internal debate over *quo pro quo* wilderness is dividing what should be a unified movement to protect public lands and wilderness.

If we are to succeed in protecting public land we need to acknowledge the importance of the debate, make room for it, and work toward an agreement about principles and bottom lines. This discussion needs to happen sooner rather than later.

In the meantime, because any entrenchment of the *quid pro quo* trend simply narrows our options, we ask again for unified opposition to the passage of any more of these damaging wilderness bills this year, in this Congress, in this political environment.

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