

The Salt Lake Tribune

Report: Wilderness bills blocked; Utah's Bishop singled out

Environment • New 'Languishing Lands' report finds partisan politics have stalled proposals.

BY BRIAN MAFFLY

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

PUBLISHED: MARCH 21, 2014 08:14AM

UPDATED: MARCH 20, 2014 08:36PM

More than two decades ago, legislation was first introduced to protect Colorado's Browns Canyon, where the Arkansas River roils out of the Rockies between pink granite walls.

The measure had bipartisan backing from that state's congressional delegation. But 13 bills later, action has yet to be taken on the proposed 22,000-acre wilderness, considered a whitewater mecca and scenic gem, according to a new report titled "Languishing Lands: Conservation Bills Stalled in Congress."

Partisan gamesmanship has bottled up dozens of bills crafted by local stakeholders and sponsored by home-state congressmen, says the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank that released the report Thursday.

Utah Republican Rob Bishop was singled out in a press call with former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and former Rep. Steve LaTourette, R-Ohio. Many expect Bishop to succeed the retiring Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Wash., as chairman of the critical House Natural Resources Committee.

Salazar and LaTourette blamed the lack of progress on cynical objections, often raised by a few House Republicans, that ensure the bills don't get a fair hearing.

"When we had the government shutdown [last fall], you saw the importance of national parks and public lands in Utah," Salazar said. "Yet the Utah delegation, Congressman Bishop in particular, is not willing to stand up for a conservation ethic that is a balanced one for the state of Utah."

The report, co-produced by the Center for Western Priorities, describes 10 landscapes proposed for protection. Legislation, often with bipartisan backing, has been introduced a combined 52 times to protect the areas, yet none has become law.

Bishop denounced the report's assertions as an "election-year smokescreen," arguing that the bills highlighted do not meet criteria for easy passage.

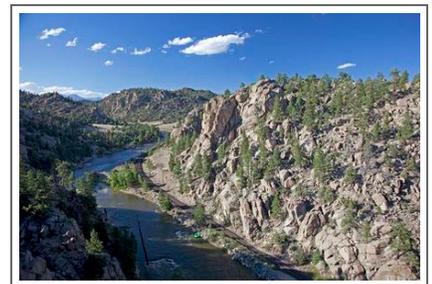
"For the majority of the ones they are talking about, [the sponsors] don't live in the district, or aren't supported by other members of the delegation," said Bishop, who chairs the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands. "We listen to the [bills] with local input and delegation support."

He said the accusation that he obstructs wilderness bills is an old one that has no credibility. Rather, he said, he insists that land protections must be carefully crafted to ensure important constituencies aren't locked out.

"Creating wilderness for the sake of creating it is pretty meaningless," Bishop said. "If there is new wilderness, we want to make sure we look at the land so that all people can use it, especially for outdoor recreation."

That may sound reasonable, but some of these provisions come in the form of "poison pill" amendments that undermine the bills' conservation goals, according to Paul Spitler, wilderness campaign director for The Wilderness Society.

"Historically Congress has given deference to its members to decide what's best in their district and that includes wilderness designations," he said. "Many members of Congress are now so ideologically rigid in their opposition to anything to do with



John Fielder | Special to the Denver Post Browns Canyon along the Arkansas River has been managed by the BLM as a Wilderness Study Area for more than a decade. Renowned for its whitewater rafting and kayaking, the 13-mile river run between Buena Vista and Salida attracts relatively few fishermen. .

conservation. Wilderness bills go to the House Natural Resources Committee to die.”

For the first time in five years, a wilderness proposal became law last week when the president signed a bill designating wilderness on 30,000 acres inside Michigan's Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

This five-year drought “set a new record for inaction on land conservation,” Salazar said, which he sees as a betrayal of the obligation Congress has to protect public lands with special natural values for future generations.

Pending in the House since 2010 is the Wasatch Wilderness and Watershed Protection Act, a bill Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, introduced that would expand existing wilderness around Mount Olympus, Lone Peak and Twin Peaks just outside Salt Lake City and designate a 26,000-acre wilderness around nearby Grandeur Peak.

But neither Matheson nor current members of the Utah delegation have signed onto the long-stalled America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which would designate 9 million acres in the San Rafael Swell, greater Canyonlands, Grand Staircase, West Desert and other iconic southern Utah landscapes. Without the blessing of home-state lawmakers, this bill has virtually no chance of passing.

Left in legislative limbo are the Wasatch proposal and three dozen other bills that are the fruits of hard-earned consensus among local leaders, according to the new report.

“There is a widening gap between American families who want more parks and open spaces to get outdoors, and a Congress that has slashed conservation budgets, shuttered parks, and has blocked nearly every community-led effort to protect lands for future generations,” said Matt Lee-Ashley of the Center for American Progress.

President Obama has vowed to wield his “authority to protect more of our pristine federal lands for future generations,” most recently using the 1906 Antiquities Act to set aside Point Arena on California's Mendocino coast.

Bishop's bill to limit this law's reach comes up for a House vote next week. His goal is to require presidents to consider local input before they designate monuments larger than 5,000 acres, but critics regard the bill as an effort to thwart the nation's conservation agenda.

Presidents may establish national monuments, but only Congress designates wilderness — untrammeled areas where mechanical equipment and permanent structures are not allowed. Over the years, Congress has added 109.5 million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

“While there have been disagreements over public land use policy in the past, more than one thousand bills meeting these criteria have moved through Congress and become law, no matter which party held control,” the report states.

bmafly@sltrib.com

—

Languishing lands

A report from the Center for American Progress, examines the legislative history of 10 high-profile land conservation bills. Bills to protect these areas have been introduced a combined 52 times over the past 30 years.

Berryessa Snow Mountain and California Desert in California;

Browns Canyon and Hermosa Creek in Colorado;

Boulder White-Clouds in Idaho;

Pine Forest Range and Gold Butte in Nevada;

Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks in New Mexico;

Tennessee Wilderness in Tennessee;

Alpine Lakes in Washington.

© Copyright 2014 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.