

THE HILL



Salazar queries Congress on wilderness protections

By Andrew Restuccia - 06/10/11 01:03 PM ET

The Interior Department asked members of Congress Friday for their input in developing a list of public lands that deserve wilderness protection, part of an effort by the administration to work closely with lawmakers after its “wild lands policy” was scuttled by Republicans.

In a letter Friday, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the Interior Department is hoping to send a list of public lands considered to be “crown jewels” that warrant permanent protection from development.

“To help inform this conservation effort, I respectfully ask that you identify BLM-managed public lands where there is strong support in the local community and among elected officials for permanent protection, and that you believe are ready for designation as Wilderness by this Congress,” Salazar said in the letter.

Salazar’s letter comes after congressional Republicans rejected an Interior Department “wild lands” policy that would give the department the authority to set aside certain public lands for wilderness protection.

Critics said the plan was as an effort to circumvent Congress’s authority and raised fears that it could be used to make lands off-limits to oil-and-gas drilling.

Republicans won the inclusion of a rider blocking funding for the program in spending legislation signed into law by President Obama. Salazar stressed last week that he will not enforce the “wild lands” policy and outlined a proposal to reach out to Congress on the issue.

Salazar said Friday that Interior’s list of “crown jewels” would be based in part of areas already identified by members of Congress, including Republicans like Rep. Darrell Issa (Calif.).

“It may also include some areas that are not currently being considered for protection, but that the Department of the Interior believes have widespread support and are worthy of Wilderness designation,” Salazar said.

Deputy Secretary David Hayes is developing a series of recommendations for how to protect land that does not receive protection under the Wilderness Act, but still has “wilderness characteristics,” Salazar said.

“Because public lands with wilderness characteristics can offer unique hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities — along with potential energy, mineral and other resource values — it is important that the BLM have clear guidance when undertaking its multiple-use land management planning and when making project-level decisions that could impair wilderness characteristics,” Salazar said.

Here's Salazar's letter:

Dear Member of Congress:

As an integral part of our effort to conserve America's lands and wildlife for future generations, I will work with Members of Congress to identify public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management for permanent Wilderness protection under the Wilderness Act. I want to continue these efforts.

Both Democratic and Republican Members of Congress support providing permanent protection for some BLM lands under the Wilderness Act. In this current session of Congress, several Members have already introduced legislation to create new areas of Wilderness. For example: H.R. 41, the Beauty Mountain and Agua Tibia Wilderness Act from Representative Darrell Issa; H.R. 113, the Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act from Representative Michael Simpson; S. 667/H.R. 1241, the Rio Grande del Norte Conservation Establishment Act by Senator Jeff Bingaman and Representative Ben Ray Luján; and S. 766/H.R. 1413, the Devil's Staircase Wilderness Act by Senator Ron Wyden and Representative Peter DeFazio.

I believe these bills – and others that have been introduced with strong local support – provide a foundation from which we can build a strong, bipartisan wilderness agenda in this Congress. To help advance this effort, the Department of the Interior will, by October 15, 2011, submit to Congress a list of “crown jewel” areas that we believe are ready for immediate Wilderness designation by Congress. This list will include some areas that would be protected by bills that are currently pending before Congress and that have strong local, state, tribal, and congressional support. It may also include some areas that are not currently being considered for protection, but that the Department of the Interior believes have widespread support and are worthy of Wilderness designation.

To help inform this conservation effort, I respectfully ask that you identify BLM-managed public lands where there is strong support in the local community and among elected officials for permanent protection, and that you believe are ready for designation as Wilderness by this Congress.

Deputy Secretary David J. Hayes will also be working with the BLM and interested parties on recommendations for how the Agency should manage the millions of acres of public land that are not protected under the Wilderness Act, but that have wilderness characteristics. Because public lands with wilderness characteristics can offer unique hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities – along with potential energy, mineral, and other resource values – it is important that the BLM have clear guidance when undertaking its multiple-use land management planning and when making project-level decisions that could impair wilderness characteristics. I welcome your input on this important policy matter as well.

Thank you in advance for your efforts to develop and advance a strong, bipartisan wilderness agenda for our children and our grandchildren.

Sincerely,

Ken Salazar

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BLM: No 'crown jewels' in Wyoming

By JEREMY PELZER

Star-Tribune capital bureau

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CHEYENNE — The Wyoming Bureau of Land Management has waved off a request by the Interior Department to list public lands in the state for possible wilderness protection.

The state BLM office didn't identify any Wyoming sites as so-called "crown-jewel" BLM-managed areas. The Interior Department will pass along a list of sites identified as "crown jewels" to Congress, which in turn will place them off-limits to most development and human activity. Thursday was the deadline for state BLM directors to send recommendations of "crown-jewel" lands.

The reason no Wyoming sites were listed is because neither Gov. Matt Mead nor any of Wyoming's 23 counties recommended any areas, BLM spokeswoman Cindy Wertz said.

In letters to the BLM, both Mead and numerous county commissions criticized the "crown jewels" effort, saying removing areas from multiple use would hurt Wyoming's economy. Wyoming's congressional delegation also wrote Interior Secretary Ken Salazar last month to express similar concerns.

But 10 conservation groups submitted recommendations of more than 50 sites for the Wyoming BLM to consider for wilderness protection, including the Oregon Buttes and the Big Empty in the Red Desert, the Dubois Badlands in the Wind River Basin and the Sweetwater Canyon in Fremont County.

Their proposals will be passed along to Washington as "informational" supplements, Wertz said.

The Interior Department created the "crown jewels" initiative after Salazar backed away in May from his "Wild Lands" policy, which would have made millions of acres of undeveloped land in the West eligible to be placed off limits to development for 15 to 20 years. The move was intended to give until Congress time to decide whether to designate them as permanent wilderness areas.

The highest level of protection for federal lands, areas designated as wilderness are placed off limits to most road construction, motorized equipment, permanent structures and even mountain biking, according to the BLM and the National Park Service.

The last wilderness designations in Wyoming took place under the Wyoming Wilderness Act of 1984, when 910,000 acres were set aside. The act also designated 180,500 acres in the state, including some BLM land, as "wilderness study areas."

The Wyoming BLM's decision not to list any "crown jewel" sites pleased Jim Magagna, who serves on the board of the Wyoming Wild Lands Coalition, a grassroots group of county commissioners and representatives of energy and agriculture businesses that formed earlier this year to fight Salazar's initiative.

But Magagna, also the executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, said opponents of the "crown jewels" plan need to stay vigilant.

"I think efforts to designate wilderness and even more broadly, efforts that we would view as a threat to multiple use will continue to arise," he said.

Bruce Pendery of the Wyoming Outdoor Council, one of the 10 environmental groups that submitted proposed "crown jewel" sites to the Wyoming BLM, said he hoped their recommendations would find a more favorable ear at the Interior Department.

"I guess I would hope that the Washington office will be a little more aggressive," he said, "and dig a little more and try and make some determinations about whether there are, in fact, crown jewels in Wyoming worthy of trying to move forward to Congress."