

Idaho gets its final say over Boulder-White Clouds

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Later this month, Idaho will take its last, best chance to decide for itself the destiny of the Boulder-White Clouds range.

Beginning on May 21, the latest version of a Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill will go before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests and Mining.

Then in June, the House Resources public lands subcommittee will take up the measure.

The Boulder-White Clouds have been at the center of Idaho's environmental movement ever since a proposed open pit molybdenum mine became the focus of the 1970 gubernatorial campaign between Republican incumbent Don Samuelson, who supported the mine, and Democrat Cecil D. Andrus, who opposed it.

Andrus won.

Over the years, Idaho created the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness Area. For more than a decade, Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, has been frustratingly close to securing wilderness protection for this iconic range as well.

At the close of the 2006 congressional session, he went home believing he had passed his Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act - only to be betrayed by then-House Speaker Dennis Hastert.

Four years later, he had the entire Idaho congressional delegation behind him, only to have Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, withdraw his support.

This year, Risch returned to the fold as co-author of a smaller bill that makes more concessions to motorized recreation. Instead of protecting 330,000 acres with CIEDRA, the new Sawtooth National Recreation Area-Plus designates 295,000 acres spread among three wilderness areas:

- The White Clouds Wilderness.
- The Ernest Hemmingway-Boulders Wilderness.
- The James McClure-Jerry Peak Wilderness.

Some would argue Simpson bargained too much away to bring Risch and the motorized community aboard. But from the beginning, Simpson brought a clear-eyed approach to the bargain: Find that delicate balance of local interests - ranchers, central Idaho residents, businesses and government officials, conservationists and recreationists - who would get behind an Idaho plan.

Waiting in the wings is a top-down federal mandate. President Barack Obama could double its size by declaring a Boulder-White Clouds National Monument using his authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906. That's the same law President Theodore Roosevelt used to protect the Grand Canyon.

With the larger land mass, however, comes these caveats:

- Obama is under no political obligation to look after the interests of Idahoans.
- Once Obama issues his proclamation, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management could spend the next two to four years drafting regulations and plans.
- By that point, there will be a new president and a new administration. The people in charge may have different ideas about some of the management details.
- And you can bet disgruntled groups will be in court. They may not win, but critics of the Antiquities Act have been itching for this kind of a fight.

Whatever its shortcomings, Simpson's bill offers certainty and the nation's highest level of protection for the Boulder-White Clouds. Once passed, an act of Congress settles the matter.

For instance, conservationists want to protect the wild character of the White Clouds by closing about 178 miles to mountain bikers. Passage of the Simpson bill would accomplish that goal.

A national monument would leave it up to the U.S. Forest Service, which probably lacks the political leverage to ever make a mountain bike ban stick.

But it's an Obama-imposed Boulder-White Clouds National Monument staring Idaho in the face if Simpson can't prevail this time. At the Idaho congressman's request, the president has given him six months to deliver.

Simpson's clock began ticking in

February. - M.T.