

# Wilderness or monument -- it's in Risch's hands

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Idaho has never been closer to creating a Boulder-White Clouds wilderness area. Monday, 2nd District Congressman Mike Simpson brought 15 years of work to bear on a House motion to pass his 295,000-acre package on a voice vote.

The swift maneuver capped years of frustration. Simpson had been here before in 2006, only to have then-Speaker Dennis Hastert yank the provisions from a must-pass bill to make room for a tax break for one of his own constituents.

Since then, Simpson has made the bill smaller - down from 330,000 acres in its original format. It's simpler in its execution. And he has brought on board two erstwhile opponents - motorized recreationists and U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho.

The torch now is passed to Risch, who, as a member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, is poised to send Simpson's bill to the Senate floor.

But time is not an ally to the fragile coalition behind this effort. After giving Simpson six months to deliver a wilderness bill, the Obama administration has signaled it will commence hearings next month with an eye toward declaring a Boulder-White Clouds national monument.

Should Obama act on his authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906, he could double the size of the protected area. With it comes, however, the imposition of a top-down mandate from a White House that is extremely unpopular in the Gem State.

Simpson's bill is the product of on-the-ground negotiations conducted among ranchers, environmentalists, local officials and recreationists.

What is allowed or prohibited in a national monument is subject to unelected bureaucracies, regulations, changing White House mandates and litigation.

As an act of Congress, the terms of Simpson's bill would be final.

Given the current dysfunction in the U.S. Senate, expecting Risch to get the bill approved this week may be impossible. But the longer Risch takes, the greater the risk that environmentalists - who held their nose as Simpson made concessions - will walk away and embrace an Obama-backed national monument.

"We do have a concern that the longer it goes, the more compromises have to be made," Idaho Conservation League Executive Director Rick Johnson told the Post Register's Bryan Clark. The ICL's "vision for this landscape has historically been much more ambitious. ... With each new reincarnation of the bill we lose a little bit."

The longer Risch takes, the more the legislative calendar gets in the way.

All the momentum Simpson achieved by passing - without a single vote cast against it - a clean bill free of gimmicks and poison pill amendments could be dissipated if Risch can't get a floor vote until after next month's congressional recess.

By September, the legislative calendar starts working against him with the approaching end of the budget year, the threat of another government shutdown and debate over Obama's Iranian nuke agreement.

Then comes the political calendar. By October, the presidential season - involving four GOP senators - kicks into higher gear.

That doesn't mean a Boulder-White Clouds wilderness couldn't slip into an end-of-the-year public lands bill. But by that time, the monument will be a near-certainty. - M.T.