Federal Push For Wilderness Protection Seeks Eligible Land

Local News

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As a follow-up to the memo issued last week and as part of his push to build a bipartisan wilderness agenda that can be enacted in the 112th Congress, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today asked Members of Congress for their ideas of “crown jewel” areas of public lands that have strong local support for permanent protection as Wilderness under the Wilderness Act. The Obama Administration’s 21st century conservation agenda marked the historic enactment of the Omnibus Public Lands Act of 2009 and implementation of the President’s America’s Great Outdoors initiative includes designating wilderness as a key component in preserving our natural heritage for future generations. Noting the bipartisan success of Congress and the Obama Administration to designate approximately 2 million acres of Wilderness in 2009, Secretary Salazar said that he will deliver to Congress, by October 15, 2011, a list of areas overseen by the Bureau of Land Management that he believes are ready for immediate Wilderness designation by Congress.

In the memo last week, Secretary Salazar announced plans to work with Members of Congress, states, tribes, and local communities to identify public lands that may be appropriate candidates for congressional protection under the Wilderness ActSecretary Salazar’s letter today also asks Members for input to inform Deputy Secretary David J. Hayes’s efforts to develop recommendations for how the Bureau of Land Management should manage the millions of acres of public land that are not protected under the Wilderness Act, but that have wilderness characteristics. The text of Secretary Salazar’s letter is below. *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