Washington Vying For New National Monument

Local News

Posted by:

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Anacortes, WA - The San Juan County Council is asking Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to champion the idea of making about 1,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land on Washington's scenic San Juan Islands into a new national monument. If that happens, it would be the culmination of three years of work by local volunteer groups, who already help the BLM maintain the property.

Jamie Stephens, a member of the San Juan County Council, says it isn't a single parcel of land, and includes some popular hiking trails, wildlife habitat and three historic lighthouses.

Some of the reefs and rocks just provide valuable habitat. But, for instance, Lopez Island and the lighthouses, those are also important recreational areas. We're a tourism economy, so it's important to be able to keep them maintained and conserved. - Jamie Stephens

He says they have been waiting for Congress to designate the land as a National Conservation Area, but the bill has languished. On a recent visit to the area, Salazar suggested trying for National Monument status, which takes a presidential signature rather than a vote. Stephens says they would be happy with either.

Local residents have two major concerns about the future of these spots, Stephens adds.

"Two very important things are keeping these preserved and not having them sold off, where they could become private, and also keeping local control. They can be accomplished through placement in the national landscape conservation system."

The San Juans also have fans of the idea who aren't locals. Rick Hegdahl lives in Bellevue, Wash., but he feels strongly enough about preserving the land to write a recent Seattle Times commentary.

"It's just one of the most beautiful places on Earth. It's not so much that I go there every day, but just the fact that it's nearby and, if I feel like it, I can go there on a day trip. Preserving lands for future use - if we have an opportunity to do it now, let's do it."

Some residents have voiced concerns that fishing or boating could be restricted in the area, but either type of federal designation would require local input into the management plan. Last week, the San Juan County Council sent an official request asking that the land be considered as a National Monument.
- Chris Thomas