

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

May 16, 2015

Editorial: Wilderness protection gets rare, powerful backing

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The Friends of Scotchman Peaks Wilderness is gaining altitude.

After almost a decade of advocacy for preservation of the 88,000 acres straddling the Idaho/Montana border, the group is ready to take its case to Washington, D.C. And its representatives will go with the unanimous endorsement of as conservative a governing body as one can find in North Idaho: the Bonner County commissioners.

The Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce has given its blessing as well. Every member of the board of directors signed the resolution.

On the Montana side, Gov. Steve Bullock has written a letter that praises the proposed sanctuary for its virtues as wildlife habitat and source of clean waters for the Clark Fork and Kootenai rivers.

“Protecting the wildest of Montana’s public lands is good business and good for our future,” he says.

Unfortunately, Idaho Gov. Butch Otter does not see it that way, on Scotchman Peak or wilderness in general. His refusal to endorse a proposed Boulder/White Cloud Wilderness in central Idaho has frustrated supporters of its creation, who may pressure President Obama to designate the area a national monument as an alternative.

A subcommittee headed by Sen. Jim Risch is scheduled to take testimony Thursday on Boulder/White Cloud, and Friends of Scotchman Peaks Executive Director Phil Hough will be among those watching. Hough will also use the trip to discuss Scotchman Peaks with the members of Idaho’s congressional delegation, whom he hopes to impress with the grassroots support the Friends have rallied behind their effort.

There is no plan to link the two wilderness designation efforts, Hough says. His group would like to get a timeline set for legislation; optimistically, with a bill introduced this year.

Although not directly related, he says one selling point could be the joint effort by the environmental, recreational and forestry groups that coalesced around wilderness designation to develop a balanced management plan for the Bottom Creek area 10 miles northeast of Coeur d'Alene in the Fernan Ranger District.

Like the Northeast Washington Forest Coalition, which is working toward solutions for diseased forests, the Panhandle Forest Collaborative is trying to get past the litigation and bureaucracy that has paralyzed forest management in much of the region.

Scotchman Peaks has the virtues of holding little harvestable timber and no major mining claims. Wilderness designation would maximize its economic value, especially as a companion to the lakes and rivers in the area.

Bonner County Commission Chairman Cary Kelly called Scotchman Peaks an exception to his rule against wilderness. An endorsement from conservative skeptics like the commission members should be a powerful signal to Congress, and to the governor.

They have not reached the summit yet, but the Friends could be on their way.

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