

## Land transfer bill faces House vote under rule suspension Government may take public lands

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BOISE – A bill that would designate 492 square miles in central Idaho as protected wilderness in exchange for a controversial transfer of public lands to state and local governments will face a floor vote in the U.S. House of Representatives on Monday.

The so-called Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act, the brainchild of Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and a handful of conservation groups, is scheduled for debate and a floor vote Monday, said Simpson spokeswoman Nikki Watts.

The bill will be considered under a suspension of House rules, a maneuver that roiled environmentalists who oppose the measure. The parliamentary move, often reserved for non-controversial measures, prohibits amendments and streamlines voting with a quick voice count.

Opponents lashed out at Simpson on Saturday, accusing him of manipulating House rules to coax a hushed vote on the contentious measure. The accelerated timeline – the bill sailed through a House committee on Wednesday – stifles debate, said singer Carole King, who has lived near Stanley, Idaho, on the fringe of the proposed wilderness area for 25 years.

"There are zero business days between the announcement of this and the vote. That means zero days for House members to educate themselves," King said Saturday. "It's bending the rules to ram it through and I think that's because Simpson fears the scrutiny."

Simpson said it was crucial to schedule a House vote immediately so the Senate has time to consider the measure before the end of this year's session.

"This is in no way a rush job," he said. "It's been six years in the making."

The bill designates three new federally protected wilderness areas in the rugged mountains of the Sawtooth and Challis national forests: the Ernest Hemingway-Boulder Wilderness, the White Clouds Wilderness and the Jerry Peak Wilderness.

It would also add 600 acres protected from development to the existing Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

In return, local governments – in Stanley, Clayton, Mackay, Challis, Custer and Blaine counties – would receive almost 4,000 acres of Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land

Management property to sell, manage or develop into affordable housing or public facilities. A 960-acre parcel of BLM land near Boise would be given to the state for a new off-road-vehicle state park.

Also, the Department of Interior would release from study 130,000 acres of public land that had been earmarked as potential wilderness, allowing federal land managers to issue permits for mining, logging or other commercial uses.

Behind-the-scenes jockeying has carved a bitter rift in the environmental community, with several conservation groups touting the bill as the first realistic chance to protect wilderness in Idaho in more than three decades. The Campaign for America's Wilderness, the Wilderness Society and the Idaho Conservation League count themselves as supporters.

Turncoats might be a more appropriate term, said John Osborn, a Spokane physician and conservation chairman of the Sierra Club's Northern Rockies chapter.

Simpson's bill fragments the area, while diluting the definition of protected wilderness to allow trails for all-terrain vehicles and dirt bikes, Osborn said. He also railed against the land transfer, charging that supportive environmental groups have caved in by allowing the privatization of public lands.

The 520,000-acre buffer zone where motorized recreation use would be capped at current levels is nothing more than a noisy speedway ringing the pristine wilderness area, Osborn said.

"This will turn that area into a magnet for motorized use," he said. "It's a bad bill and a severely compromised wilderness."

Simpson countered that the bill represents a "true compromise" among several competing interests.

"The congressman is not concerned about the Sierra Club's opposition," spokeswoman Watts said. "They are an extremist environmental group with questionable credentials."

If the measure passes the House, it will go before a U.S. Senate subcommittee chaired by Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho. Craig has not taken a position on Simpson's bill.

Idaho's other GOP senator, Mike Crapo, would support the bill, said spokeswoman Susan Wheeler.

*[The Bill's only reference to affordable housing is one parcel in a flood plain and former sewage lagoon adjacent to the town of Stanley. The remainder of the Sawtooth NRA and other public lands given away for development will be sold to the highest bidder, as you would expect. ~ John Osborn]*