

Mono County Supports Hoover Wilderness Additions

Mono County Board of Supervisors Act Unanimously

by Elin Ljung

Editor's note: Many members have inquired about the ongoing efforts to designate additional lands near the Mono Basin as wilderness. While the wilderness additions are outside the Mono Lake Committee's primary area of work, we thought this update would be of interest.

On Tuesday, August 2nd, the Mono County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to support the proposed addition to the Hoover Wilderness, which would increase the existing area by 40,000 acres. This agreement comes on the heels of nearly six months of negotiations between wilderness advocates and recreational snowmobile users, and as a result, contains elements of compromise for both sides.

The 40,000-acre extension goes a long way toward ensuring future protection for a dramatic stretch of the Sierra Nevada near Sonora Pass. The proposed addition is located in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, bordered by Yosemite National Park and the Emigrant Wilderness Area, and has a portion of the Pacific Crest Trail

running through it. This area includes Fremont Lake, Rainbow Meadow, Tower Peak, Piute Meadow, and the environmentally sensitive headwaters of the West Walker River.

Wilderness advocates called for an end to recreational snowmobiling in the Leavitt Bowl, which has technically not been open to snowmobiling since 1984, although this provision has never been enforced by the Forest Service. However, the compromise that the Board passed includes letting the 7,660 acres of the Leavitt Bowl be legally open to recreational snowmobiles. In addition, another 3,200-acre parcel that can be accessed from Bridgeport would also be open to snowmobiles, providing an opportunity for winter tourism.

The agreement asks the Forest Service to ensure that recreational use is safe and environmentally sound. The compromise specifies an end date of April 15th for snowmobiling in the two recreational parcels. This will allow for responsible ecosystem management. Additionally, after the end date backcountry skiers will have a

chance to visit the area without experiencing snowmobile traffic. The Forest Service can exercise an option to extend that end date in heavy winters, when bigger snowpack would protect natural resources for longer. In order to help the Forest Service effectively monitor and enforce the new snowmobile laws, the compromise includes a request for funding.

The Next Step

Now that the Mono County Board has passed the proposed addition to the Hoover Wilderness, the next step lies with Representative Howard "Buck" McKeon (R-Santa Clarita). He has pledged to introduce federal legislation reflecting the compromise which could make the Hoover Wilderness extension a reality.

For more information contact Sally Miller at the Wilderness Society (sally_miller@twsw.org) at (760) 934-4473. ❖

Elin Ljung is the Committee's Communications Intern. She's been trying on other people's houses and pets as the new local house sitter.

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the ditch to carry 40–52 cfs of water in contrast to the current maximum of roughly 15 cfs—is part of a settlement agreed to by Southern California Edison (the power plant operator), land management agencies, the Department of Fish and Game, CalTrout, and the Mono Lake Committee.

FERC does not have to follow a fixed timetable to issue its ruling on the settlement, and earlier hopes for a late summer decision have dimmed. It now seems much more likely that a ruling won't come out until 2006. If FERC adopts the settlement as submitted, refurbishment of the return ditch could be underway within several years, promising healthier, water rights-based flows for Mill Creek and the streamside forest, wildlife, and birds that depend on it.

There has been progress since the settlement was submitted, however, in the FERC procedure. In June, the settlement parties jointly submitted a response to questions and concerns submitted by Mono County and others. (The response will be the subject of a future *Newsletter* article.) In late August FERC issued a request for further documents and information relating to the settlement, indicating that review and analysis is underway in Washington, D.C.

Mono County Seeks to Intervene

Another procedural action happened back in May, when Mono County filed papers seeking recognition by FERC as an official "intervener" in the relicensing process. The County's motivation for seeking such status

appears to be the filing of the settlement agreement. The county cited its role as a public agency and concern for its Conway Ranch water rights as justifications, though it conceded that the settlement doesn't impede delivery of those rights. Southern California Edison opposed the motion, pointing out that "the County is over 22 years late" in its request and noting that the County has passed up previous opportunities to seek intervener status for the same reasons. FERC, which granted the Committee intervener status in 1999, has not yet ruled on Mono County's application. ❖

Geoff McQuilkin is the Committee's Executive Director of Operations. He has enjoyed hearing Mill Creek flowing all summer long!