



Snohomish County Council

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Councilman Jeff Sax (425) 388-3494

Councilman Sax Asked to Testify in Washington DC

Congressman Walden seeks input on Wild Sky Bill

[Everett, Wash.] Councilman Jeff Sax was asked to weigh in on the Wild Sky bill at a House Natural Resources Committee by Congressman Greg Walden, Chairman of Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health. Sax will appear at 11:00 AM EDT on Thursday, July 22nd before the committee to offer his testimony on the Wild Sky bill, HR 822, sponsored by Congressman Rick Larsen.

“It is an honor to represent the county and our concerns before Congress,” stated Sax. “I look forward to talking to the committee and our delegations to seek resolution about issues that have been raised with regard to the Wild Sky legislation.”

Federal law provides explicit criteria which must be met to justify wilderness area designations. Members of the King and Snohomish County Councils, where the Wild Sky proposal largely resides, share House Resource Committee Chairman Congressman Richard Pombo’s concern that the original measure doesn’t meet wilderness criteria.

“The main concerns that we have with the bill related to increased traffic to the area, as Senator Murray has estimated that 2.3 million people are expected to live near or visit the area,” added Sax. “There are multiple issues related to congestion, repair and safety already in the Highway 2 corridor. Increased traffic without remedying the situation is a recipe for disaster.”

A copy of an opinion editorial outlining the concerns shared by council members is below. For more information, please contact Councilman Sax’s office at: 425-388-3494.

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Wild About Wild Sky?

By: Snohomish County Councilmen Jeff Sax & Gary Nelson and
King County Council Representative Kathy Lambert

Opposition to the Wild Sky proposal of Congressman Larsen and Senators Murray and Cantwell is based on the straightforward requirements of federal law. It may come as a surprise to some, but federal law provides explicit criteria which must be met to justify wilderness area designations. The problem is that the Wild Sky proposal (in its present form) doesn't meet these criteria.

We have been in contact with Chairman Richard Pombo (R-CA) of the House Resource Committee, where the Wild Sky legislation currently sits, to find out what it would take to make Wild Sky a reality. We were sent a copy of a letter that Congressman Pombo wrote to Congressman Larsen outlining what exactly it would take to get wilderness legislation heard and passed out of his committee.

In that letter, Pombo laid out a set of principles that all proposals for wilderness designation must meet: Proposals should resolve outstanding Wilderness Study Area recommendations, including those deemed unsuitable.

The National Forest Management Act, cited by Pombo, requires the Forest Service to draft and implement forest plans and revise them every 15 years, analyzing and identifying potential wilderness. Of the 106,000 acres in the Wild Sky proposal, the US Forest Service reports that currently 16,000 acres are unsuitable for wilderness designation as they include 35 miles of roads that are in predominantly low elevation forests that have been utilized for both timber and mining in the last 80 years.

Abigail Kimbell, Associate Deputy Chief, US Forest Service and John Phipps, Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest Supervisor, have both raised questions about Wild Sky's adherence to the original 1964 Wilderness Act, bringing attention to the issue of man's already noticeable imprint in the area.

Phipps wrote to Congresswoman Jennifer Dunn on June 5, 2002, "...the estimated cost to restore these roads to a wilderness character and convert 12 miles to trail is estimated at \$6.5 million." The Congressional Budget office estimated that the total cost of Wild Sky between 2004 and 2008 will be \$18 million.

In a state starved for transportation infrastructure dollars, does it make sense to take \$18 million to remove roads in order to restore "wilderness character?" It would make more sense to use those dollars for improvements in the Cascade Scenic Loop area so that visitors could more easily and more safely access the proposed wilderness area.

Pombo's second principle calls for risk assessment measures, which must be consistent with fire management plans and allow for appropriate mechanized access for wildfire

containment or disease control. Given our region's current drought condition and numerous fires already this year, this principle must be addressed.

Pombo asks for property protections if they exist within or adjacent to a potential wilderness area and asks that all exceptions, such as those for snowmobile use, be specifically called for in the legislation.

Finally, Pombo calls for community involvement, approval from the entire congressional delegation and adequate notice and local public hearings. To date, despite requests from the public and the Snohomish County Council, not a single Congressional hearing has been held in the district to collect input from the citizens it would affect. Nor has Congressman Larsen, a former member of the Snohomish County Council, asked for the opinion of the Council on this bill.

However, we hear regularly from Forests for People, who have over 1,400 members, about their opposition to Wild Sky in their backyard. Recently, both the Farm Bureau and the Washington State Snowmobile Association (originally in favor of Wild Sky) voiced their opposition.

The original intent of the Act, which Pombo is trying to preserve, says among other things that Wilderness is "...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man,...an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation..., ...with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable."

The Forest Service has noted, there are still 70-75,000 acres of lands eligible under the 1964 Wilderness Act that would help meet the goals of Wild Sky.

Limiting the designation to these boundaries is an alternative that should be considered, along with ensuring a transportation infrastructure that is safe and can accommodate Senator Murray's estimated traffic increases. Perhaps the 16,000 acres in question by the US Forest Service could be maintained as national forest or other designation as a means of compromise – one that allows this bill to become reality.

No one should confuse Senate courtesy with bipartisan support. The Senate has a long tradition of passing out parks and wilderness legislation that carries the endorsement of both home state Senators without opposition, leading to the appearance of unanimous support in the Senate.

With all of the flaws in the proposal duly noted, it is not wholly impossible to revise the legislation so that it can meet the requirements of federal law and gain true bipartisan support. We ask our entire delegation, Democrat and Republican, to work with Chairman Pombo to see if a suitable resolution can be worked out that achieves true bipartisan support of Wild Sky; a bill that meets the intent of the Wilderness Act, allowing access to the area and, above all, allowing the voice of the community to be heard.