

Huge public lands bill gets final congressional approval

26 March 2009, By Michael Doyle

The House of Representatives on Wednesday gave long-awaited final approval to a massive public lands package designed to protect wilderness, restore rivers and expand national parks.

Years of debate and negotiations ended anticlimactically, as the 1,218-page bill strolled to victory on a 285-140 margin. Approved earlier by the Senate, the legislation now goes to the White House for President Barack Obama's signature.

"It will restore balance to the management of our [public lands](#) ... after nearly a decade in which responsible land stewardship was abandoned," said Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., chairman of the House [Natural Resources Committee](#).

Tactically constructed, with provisions targeting a majority of states, the bill drew 38 Republicans to join 247 Democrats. Even so, conservative GOP critics lambasted the bill as a land grab put together with what one Republican lawmaker termed "every legislative trick in (the Democratic) playbook."

House Democratic leaders brought the measure to the floor in a way that blocked potential amendments.

"The passage of this bill is another disappointing display of heavy-handed Democratic tactics that rely on secret, backroom bill-writings that are then jammed through without any opportunity for alternatives," complained Rep. Doc Hastings of Washington, the senior Republican on the House resources panel.

Dubbed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, the measure pulled together more than 150 separate public lands, parks and water bills into one package. Among other things, the legislation designates 2 million acres of additional wilderness in nine states and 1,000 miles of new

wild and scenic rivers. It creates three new national park units, one new national monument and 10 new [national heritage areas](#).

Provisions in the bill range from honoring President Bill Clinton's birthplace in Arkansas to creating a national institute for the study of caves. It designates a Wyoming river as wild and scenic, creates a geologic trail that tracks cataclysmic ice age floods and requires the government to research the problem of increasingly acidic oceans.

"Altogether, it is one of the most sweeping conservation laws that Congress has passed in many, many years," declared Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The bill will be expensive. It authorizes projects expected to cost more than \$5.5 billion over five years if Congress provides the money, according to the Congressional Budget Office. It also adds an additional \$900 million in spending after 2013, the nonpartisan budget office estimates.

Hastings warned the bill would restrict potential development of energy resources on public lands, while other lawmakers focused on the addition of new lands to the national wilderness roll.

"The federal government already owns 30 percent of the total land area of the United States," said Rep. George Radanovich, R-Calif. "I don't think we need any more."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, however, called the bill's passage "a day of celebration for all who treasure and enjoy our natural and cultural heritage," and numerous environmental groups had been lobbying hard for its passage. In many cases, the public lands package collected provisions that had lingered without action during the years that Republicans had controlled Congress.

One provision, for instance, names a new wilderness in California's Sierra Nevada mountains after former California Rep. John Krebs. The measure creating the John Krebs Wilderness was first introduced in 2002.

The bill's occasionally rocky road to passage included a controversy over allowing guns in national parks and a concern that some amendments might expose potentially vulnerable lawmakers to difficult votes.

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