

# HANSEN'S BILL

*A Congressman Would Open Millions of Acres of Wilderness to Mountain Bikes. The Question Is: Why?*

BY GARY SPRUNG

Congress is considering a bill that would allow bicycling in federally designated wilderness areas. Introduced last August by Rep. James Hansen, a Republican from Utah, H.R. 3172 would retain the 1964 Wilderness Act's prohibition on "mechanical transport" but would add the proviso "(except for non-motorized bicycles)."

When Hansen introduced the bill, he said bicycles are "...an environmentally sound, internationally accepted form of transportation. Bicycles seldom have the urge to graze on critical habitats, and do not contribute to the natural fertilization of their environment. The average urban citizen is far more likely to own a bicycle than he is to own a horse."

Rep. Ron Marlenee of Montana, one of 14 Republican co-sponsors, added a few equally appealing points. "Mountain bikes are a clean and quiet form of outdoor recreation," he said. "Because of their light weight and sound engineering, their impact is light on the land and less than that of some other uses currently allowed in the wilderness. Moreover, mountain bike riding is good, wholesome recreation that can be enjoyed by entire families."

He continued, "Legislation, such as the one offered by Mr. Hansen of Utah, realizes that new forms of outdoor recreation are constantly being developed. These developments in the recreation industry are a tribute to American ingenuity and our free-enterprise system."

After hearing these pleas, most mountain bikers would be ready to join the congressmen. But wait...

The Wilderness Act is the key law that preserves U.S. land in its natural state and protects it from development and overuse. Eighty-nine million acres in 44 states are currently designated wilderness.

The original wording of the Act was a compromise and not strong enough to suit most environmentalists. And since then, the law has been constantly at-

tacked by a variety of user groups.

Darrell Kanufke, director of the Wilderness Society's Denver regional office, says, "If you reach back 25 years and look at the history of the Wilderness Act in the western states, you can see that there has been one effort after another to dilute [its] effectiveness."

Given this history and current nationwide development pressures, it's easy to understand why the environmental community considers the Act to

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be inviolate.

"It's not that we don't like mountain bikes," says Ron Tipton, the Wilderness Society's director of field operations. "But wilderness areas were set aside to preserve natural areas in a primeval state. The experience of a person is going to be seriously degraded if you are going to be watching mountain bikes whizzing towards you."

### *Suspicious Intentions*

Personally, I believe bicycles should be allowed in some wilderness areas on some trails. But I don't support the Hansen bill because I'm suspicious of the motives of its supporters.

As a reader of *High Country News* (a magazine "For Those Who Care About

the West"), I know Hansen, Marlenee and co-backers Larry Craig of Idaho and Don Young of Alaska are not friends of wilderness. I suspect that Kanufke is not kidding when he suggests, "Their support for mountain bikes in wilderness is not indicative of much because they also think it's okay to have bulldozers in wilderness."

Kanufke adds, "I think their bill is much more anti-wilderness than pro mountain bikes. Mr. Hansen starts from the premise that there ought not to be a wilderness. I think he perceives this as an ideal way to drive a wedge between conservationists on mountain bikes and conservationists in hiking boots."

True? I turned to lobbyist Tipton for facts on the co-sponsors' voting records. He unearthed the 1988 general environmental ratings assigned by The League of Conservation Voters. For the entire House of Representatives, the average rating was 50 of a possible 100. For supporters of H.R. 3172, ratings ranged from 6 to 25.

Speaking of the Hansen bill's co-sponsors, Tipton says, "You almost could not pick a more anti-wilderness group. Take Denny and Bob Smith, both from southern Oregon, but not brothers. They are anti-wilderness and anti-land protection in every way, shape and form. Look at Barbara Vucanovich, also a co-sponsor. Her Nevada wilderness bill would add a total of 136,000 acres. That's much less than even the Forest Service recommended. In a state where only one designated wilderness exists and 88% of the state is federally owned, she's one of the principal reasons we don't have a bill there.

"Larry Craig is always standing up for timber, mining and grazing interests," Tipton continues. "He's right there high on our enemies list. He would feel same way about us."

According to Tipton, Hansen has twice fought legislation to expand protection of national parks. He also weak-

ened protection for Capitol Reef National Park by supporting continuation of cattle grazing on fragile desert lands. Whereas Utah congressman Wayne Owens, who represents Salt Lake City, introduced a wilderness bill for 5.1 million acres, Hansen proposed a figure of 1.3 million. Even the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recommended 1.9 million, Tipton notes.

### *Hansen's Perspective*

Hansen's press secretary, Rick Guldan, answers the bill's critics by saying, "We are not anti-wilderness. The congressman would fight motorized use in wilderness areas."

Guldan explains Hansen's motivation for introducing the bill by saying, "Mountain biking is a big activity in southern Utah. With much of the land now under wilderness designation, there are fewer places for mountain bikers to enjoy the sport. We've had several requests from our constituents to introduce legislation on behalf of

mountain bikers. We've found that mountain bikes have negligible impact on land."

Guldan says opponents of the amendment are "...very selfish. The one big concern these wilderness aficionados have is that they will be run down on trails. But that's absurd. The BLM or Forest Service will still have regulatory authority to control trail use."

### *Priorities*

By the time you read this, Hansen's bill may have advanced from its Natural Resources subcommittee to a hearing before the entire House. While Washington insiders say it has little chance of passage, the bill may position mountain bikers as a group on the wrong side of the wilderness issue.

Even as a longtime rider, I believe designating new wilderness areas is more important than our self-interest in gaining access to these lands. Therefore, I'm against an alliance with these

western congressmen. We can afford to wait on the issue of wilderness access. After all, we have enough to do just keeping state parks and non-wilderness federal lands open to bicycles.

Support for H.R. 1372 is also strategically unwise. We need cooperation, not conflict, with the environmental community—a community of which we are a part. The Sierra Club and the American Hiking Society are just 2 of the many environmental groups who are adamantly opposed to Hansen's bill, and we can't afford to alienate them now.

If we want the legal right to pedal in wilderness, we can push for it on a case-by-case basis. For example, H.R. 1473, the Sespe Wilderness Act introduced by Rep. Robert Lagomarsino of California, would allow the local forester to determine which trails, if any, should be closed to bicycles in the Sespe wilderness. We should be willing to trust the judgment of local foresters, provided they listen to public input. ■

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## ROCKY MOUNTAIN REGION

What constitutes a trail? To me, it's a narrow path, a foot or 2 wide. But to some, a jeep road is a trail. For example, I took a singletrack ride on Colorado's Uncompaghre Plateau this summer, then read the description of that area in a new mountain bike guidebook. The author described the double-track jeep section as a trail, then added that the route becomes "unridable" at the point where the terrific singletrack begins.

Equally important to mountain bikers is the definition of a "trail vehicle," which the Code of Federal Regulations

defines as having a width of up to 40 inches. This allows motorized ATVs to be legal on most nonwilderness trails under federal jurisdiction—even single-track that is much narrower than 40 inches. The definition should be changed because it fosters trail damage and safety problems.

■ The rails-to-trails movement, which coordinates the conversion of abandoned railroad lines to cycling, hiking and equestrian use, is growing quickly. Only 4 years old, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy now has 50,000 members, 5 state chapters, 6 field offices, and a

terrific newsletter. RTC president David Burwell reports 213 U.S. rail trails (a doubling in 2 years) totaling 2,721 miles and more than 27 million users annually.

One of the most dramatic developments for the RTC is a recent court decision permitting a 200-mile rail trail in Missouri along the state's namesake river. The RTC plans to someday have a rail-trail network that stretches from Washington, DC, to Kansas City. For more information, contact RTC at 1400 16th St. NW, Washington, DC 20036; 202/797-5400.

—G.S.