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Idaho wilderness bill would give local governments land, moneyBy CHRISTOPHER SMITH
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BOISE, Idaho -- An Idaho congressman introduced legislation Thursday that would set aside more than 300,000 acres of rugged central Idaho as new wilderness while giving the state and surrounding communities millions of dollars and an estimated 3,000 acres of federally owned land as compensation.

Republican Rep. Mike Simpson said his \$20 million proposal would offset the economic impact of protecting the scenic Boulder and White Cloud mountains from development. Sweetening wilderness designations with land gifts and cash payments to neighboring communities is the future of wilderness legislation, he said.

"In the past, it was always where the (boundary) lines would be drawn," Simpson said in a telephone briefing. "In this bill, we've expanded that debate ... We've tried to take care of the needs of the recreationists, the counties, the ranchers."

Under the proposal, the state of Idaho, the counties of Custer and Blaine, and the towns of Stanley, Challis and Clayton would receive - free - a total of about 3,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management property. The land could be developed however local governments see fit, although 960 acres going to the state would be earmarked for an off-road-vehicle park near Boise.

Three new preserves - the Ernest Hemingway, White Cloud and Jack Peak wilderness areas - would be created from 311,000 acres, adding to Idaho's current six federal wilderness areas totaling 4 million acres. Another 131,616 acres now being studied as potential wilderness would be released for development or not recommended as wilderness.

A total of \$20 million would be requested from Congress to pay for constructing trails, off-road-vehicle routes and campgrounds on lands not set aside as wilderness, plus cash payments to local livestock ranchers and to local communities to "offer economic options for traditional users of such lands," according to the bill.

Reaction by ranchers, environmentalists and other interested groups ranged from grudging acceptance to loathing.

"I'm opposed to any more wilderness in Custer County," said rancher Cliff Hansen, a commissioner of Custer County, which would receive \$5 million and 86 acres from the Forest Service-managed Sawtooth National Recreation Area under Simpson's bill. "But we live and survive up here off one mine and one day that will close, so we thought this was a chance to get a few extra acres on the tax rolls for the county."

Celebrity singer-songwriter Carole King, who has lived in Custer County for 27 years, called Simpson's bill "poison" for the area.

"It would pretty much trash all the benefits of creating the Sawtooth" recreation area, King said of the 756,000-acre area Congress set aside for preservation in the 1970s after citizens defeated a proposed molybdenum mine. King has been lobbying Congress for alternative legislation, a sweeping Northern Rockies wilderness designation bill sponsored by Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., which has picked up 155 co-sponsors in the 435-member House.

Simpson said he has yet to get a co-sponsor for his measure, but anticipated bipartisan support even though Republicans may not like the price tag or the creation of new wilderness and Democrats may not like the giveaway of public lands.

"Custer County is a county that is 96 percent federal land so giving them a little land to create an economic tax base doesn't seem like a big deal to me," he said.

Janine Blaeloch, director of the Western Land Exchange Project in Seattle, said Simpson's bill sends a message that undeveloped public lands "are a disposable asset to reward local constituents and to bolster economic development."

Other environmental leaders welcomed the measure as a positive first step to resolving three decades of land-use conflicts in an area that contains the highest peaks in the state, popular snowmobile and off-road-vehicle trails, historic ranches and scenic grandeur.

"This is not a bill we are going to turn our backs on," said Craig Gehrke, regional director for The Wilderness Society.

Former Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus, a Democrat who as Idaho's governor in 1988 unsuccessfully tried to protect 150,000 acres of the Boulder and White Cloud ranges in a compromise wilderness bill with former Republican U.S. Sen. Jim McClure, said Simpson's proposal is overdue.

"I believe he is crafting a compromise that may well present the last, best chance to resolve issues about management of this area," Andrus said.