

Las Cruces Deserves a Field Hearing on the Wilderness Bill

by Steve Pearce

W I just met with Dudley and Rose Williams. They own a ranch on the West Potrillos, an area designated to become wilderness in the new bill presented by both US Senators from New Mexico, SB 1689. You are told the bill will be good for the country and good for New Mexico.

If it will be good for everyone, why is the truth not told? Why do the facts get so buried? Why do we not have a hearing in Las Cruces?

According to the ranchers, two members of Senator Bingaman's staff, Jorge Silvia-Banuelos and Dara Parker, made a big deal out of sitting with the Williams to "hear their complaint" about the wilderness area. They spent a couple of hours with them, listening, nodding their heads in agreement, inserting into the maps of the wilderness all the improvements that had been installed by these good, solid citizens. Roads, dirt tanks, pipelines, solar panels, water storage tanks. These are things that are needed to ranch in the desert and which have been approved by the government and paid for by the rancher.

When the bill was introduced, not one of the improvements was listed. When Dudley and his wife asked about the assurances they had been given and the maps that had been drawn, they received mute stares, even from Jorge and Dana who had sat with them. It took weeks for them to even get the maps back for their own use. The maps which will be used in the Senate have been scrubbed. They will present the impression that the land is untouched, that there are no improvements, that there is no sign of human habitation.

You see, there is a small problem. The underlying Wilderness Act has a requirement that areas designated as Wilderness cannot show any signs of human habitation. No roads, no fences, no dirt tanks...nothing is allowed. It is to be untouched by humans. If all the improvements had been shown, the area would not technically qualify as wilderness.

There is a second small problem. The Constitution does not allow the government to take away private property without compensation. But when this bill is passed and when it creates wilderness on the existing ranch, if the ranch eventually goes broke, the Williams' will not be compensated. This is called a government "takings" and is prohibited by the Constitution. Do a google search for Kit Laney, Gila Wilderness, to see what the government can and will do to ranchers who are on wilderness area. So, all the improvements were erased, like they did not exist. The truth about the ranch was washed away in the great Washington whitewash tank. It will be impossible to tell exactly when and where the changes were made.

No Senator outside New Mexico will ever see the ranch; there will be no visits by a Congressional Delegation. Instead, everyone who votes on the bill will be shown the maps and will be told that they are correct. But the maps are not correct, there are improvements on the land that are not listed on the map or in the bill.

The Williams' ranch will be at risk of going broke the way many ranches on the Gila Wilderness went broke. Jobs will be lost, the tax base for Dona Ana County will shrink.

Citizens and legislators would not have allowed this to happen if they had all the facts but the facts and truth got lost along the way.

Similar stories are being told by other ranchers I have met with.

The Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce recently presented a letter signed by the chamber President, John Hummer, which stated that they have grave concerns about the Wilderness bill and the effect it will have here in Las Cruces. The letter specifically mentions National Security and future economic growth as significant concerns.

The local Soil and Water Conservation District president, Joe Delk, states that SB 1689, the Wilderness Bill, will pose threats to the safety of Las Cruces. He reported that floods similar to the one in Hatch a couple of years ago could happen in Las Cruces. He said experts have told them Las Cruces is sitting on a ticking flood time bomb. The earth dams that protect Las Cruces from the rains in the foothills were washed out in those same rains that flooded Hatch. The government has not gotten around to repairing them. Since mechanized equipment is prohibited on wilderness land, if the bill is passed, they will never be repaired. Never is a long time for the city to be at risk.

It is hard for everyday citizens to believe a law could be so extreme as to prevent motorized equipment from being used to protect citizens. Years ago a pilot from Hobbs had an emergency and crashed in the Gila Wilderness. The Wilderness designation was so restrictive and so unyielding that rescue workers were prohibited from landing a helicopter to see if there were survivors or to get the bodies out. When rescue workers finally arrived, all had perished. The bodies had to be carried out by workers who had to backpack into the wilderness and backpack out with the bodies on stretchers. That is extreme.

The Cox ranch is on a wilderness study area in the Organ Mountains. The owner testified that his family was prohibited by the government from using a chainsaw on his ranch because it was considered mechanized equipment. That is extreme. Few people realize just how restrictive the Wilderness designation is.

The Senators and Congressman from the second district should have a field hearing in Las Cruces to give the local people a chance to express their concerns, to see if the bill they are pushing in Washington will truly be good for Las Cruces. To Senator Bingaman's defense, I doubt he even knew these discussions took place. The citizens who will have to live with the bill, the ranchers who have to work with the bill, the disabled who will never be allowed to drive their vans in wilderness, the sportsmen who don't have days to backpack into and out of the area to hunt, the businessmen who provide the jobs for this area all have a stake in this town and have a right to have their concerns heard.