

Call of the WILD

FRIENDS OF NEVADA WILDERNESS

Keeping Nevada Wild Since 1984

JULY 2004

What's proposed for wilderness?

Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act

By Shaaron Netherton

The Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act of 2004 (S2532/HR4593) would designate 14 new wilderness areas, totaling 769,611 acres as wilderness, and release 245,516 acres from wilderness study area consideration. Wilderness management and release provisions set no new precedent for wilderness in the United States. These provisions are the same as those used for BLM wilderness areas in the Clark County Conservation of Public Lands and Natural Resources Act of 2002.

There is also no "hard release" language in this bill, which means all areas released as wilderness study areas could be considered for wilderness again in the future.

Although it falls short of our expectations, this bill would designate more Wilderness than any other single bill has designated in Nevada. Our Citizens' proposal includes 2.5 million acres of wild lands mostly in Lincoln County. A large chunk of that proposal is land in the Desert National Game Range. These US Fish and Wildlife-managed wild lands are not included in this bill, but they will remain protected as proposed wilderness until we are able to get them designated in future legislation.

Of special note are the "Big Four," the Mormon, Meadow Valley, Delamar and Clover Mountains. Three of these new wilderness areas would become the second, third and fifth-biggest wilderness areas in the state (the Black Rock Desert is the largest; Arc Dome would become fourth). These four areas total about 476,000 acres. The "Big Four" and the nearby Desert National Wildlife Range comprise an extensive block of relatively in-

tact wild landscapes. The bill also includes several citizen-proposed areas, including the stunning Big Rocks Wilderness and Mt. Irish Wilderness with its rich archeological resources. These citizen areas were missed by the BLM during their inventory and never became wilderness study areas.

Many areas would receive permanent wilderness protection in this bill. The lofty limestone cliffs of the Far South Egans and Worthington Mountains hold important underground wilderness values with their fragile cave resources, along with their

rugged outer beauty. The rainbow of colorful volcanic tuff formations would be protected in the Fortification Range. Wildlife habitat galore would be protected with the many springs and seeps of the White Rock Range. Bristlecone pines cling to the tops of the Worthington Mountains, and large Ponderosa Pine forests are found in the Weepah Spring area and Clover Mountains. Parsnip Peak cradles large stands of quaking aspen.

Throughout these areas, many wildlife species depend on the solitude, freedom and habitat that wilderness protects, from the desert tortoise to elk, deer, bighorn, goshawks and golden eagles.

"Many areas would receive permanent wilderness protection."

FRIENDS OF



NEVADA
WILDERNESS

SPECIAL
EDITION

EASTERN
NEVADA
PUBLIC
LANDS
BILL IS
INTRODUCED

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Timing is everything. For almost four years, the board and staff of Friends of Nevada Wilderness have been working hard to protect eastern Nevada's wild places. We've reported to you on our progress and highlighted some of these fabulous areas.

Almost the day you received your June newsletter in your mailbox, our Congressional delegation simultaneously introduced in the House and Senate the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act of 2004. Because protecting eastern Nevada is so important and every one of you has helped in many ways, we wanted to get a special edition of the newsletter out to you, our members, as soon as possible.

For me, the legislation is bitter-sweet. I lived in Ely for over eight years and know and love many of these places. Yes, the bill proposes to protect some magnificent wild places, but it's fewer than I had hoped, and far less than our 2.5-million-acre Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Lincoln County. There are key areas missing in the legislation, such as the Pahrnagat Range, part of the Mt. Irish area, Dutch John Mountain and the vast wild areas in the Desert National Wildlife Range managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Lower slopes of many wilderness study areas have also been left out.

There are also titles in the bill, such as the water pipeline corridors and rights-of-way, that Friends of Nevada Wilderness and the entire Nevada environmental community vigorously oppose.

We have always believed the way to accomplish wilderness protection is to work with all the stakeholders — the local and federal governments, land owners, miners, ranchers, hunters and fishermen, mountain bikers,

OHV enthusiasts, etc. These incredible lands belong to all of us. I firmly believe that the more polarized our country becomes, and the more polarized our issues become, the harder it will be to find workable solutions

on the ground, where solutions matter most. We must learn to work together, trust each other and focus on the values that we share.

This issue of the newsletter is meant to inform you of the facts and let you come to your own conclusions on how you feel about this bill. Contact information for the entire Nevada Congressional delegation is included. I hope you will share your opinions with the delegation on how to improve this complex legislation. In this newsletter, we offer some suggestions for improving the Wilderness title as well as other titles.

For more information, refer to our website at

www.nevadawilderness.org

For the Wild!

Shaaron Netherton
Executive Director



Hold the anchovies!

Lincoln County Wilderness

By Roger Scholl and Brian Beffort

On June 16, 2004, the entire bipartisan Nevada Congressional delegation introduced the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act of 2004. Like the Clark County bill that passed in 2002, the Act is not a wilderness bill, but rather an omnibus public lands bill that would legislate several actions involving public lands in the county. Some of these actions we support and are working to make stronger. Others we oppose and are working to eliminate.

As we at Friends of Nevada Wilderness weigh the pros and cons of the different parts of the Act, we are reminded of the sometimes-frustrating way in which Congress works.

Maybe it's the fact that we haven't had lunch yet today, but somehow this legislative process reminds us of food. So here's an analogy:

In early 2001, our Congressional delegation announced they would be baking a Lincoln County public-lands pizza. For several reasons (efficiency and expediency might be two), the delegation has chosen to address many eastern Nevada land issues in one big pizza, as they did in Clark County in 2002. They invited the public to provide their concerns and proposals as ingredients. Rural citizens, local governments, land management agencies, sportsmen, miners, off-road vehicle enthusiasts and the Nevada Wilderness Coalition responded. Each group brought its favorite ingredients.

Now the delegation has assembled the pizza, and we're looking at it before it goes into the oven. We don't like what we see. Someone else brought anchovies (we hate anchovies), and we want more mushrooms.

If this were our party, we would have done things differently (more mushrooms, no anchovies), but it's not. We have to remind ourselves that we're not the only ones at the table, and we're not in control of the process. Such is the nature of cordial dining and American politics.

Some argue that our elected leaders work for us, and that we should demand a pizza we like

better. We are constantly asking them to do just that, but we also recognize that they work for every other Nevadan as well, some of whom have requested things we don't like. As with so



many other bills working through Congress (the Energy and Appropriations bills are good examples), the Lincoln County bill has both good ingredients and bad. Until it passes, we will work to add more good stuff and get rid of the bad.

As much as we believe in wilderness, we believe in American Democracy more. Rather than throwing bombs at each other, we gather around the table to contribute to a political pizza with other Americans. It's not always delicious, but we see it as our only choice, as today's political climate won't tolerate a mushroom-only pizza. If not everyone sees the ecological, aesthetic and health benefits of mushrooms, we will continue to talk with them until they understand and appreciate what we find obvious.

Leaving the table entirely only further polarizes our politics, which isn't good for wilderness or our country.

*Mormon
Mountains
proposed
wilderness area*

*"Come on in – the
earth, like the sun,
belongs to everyone
and to no one."
- Edward Abbey*



Proposed wilderness areas in Lincoln County

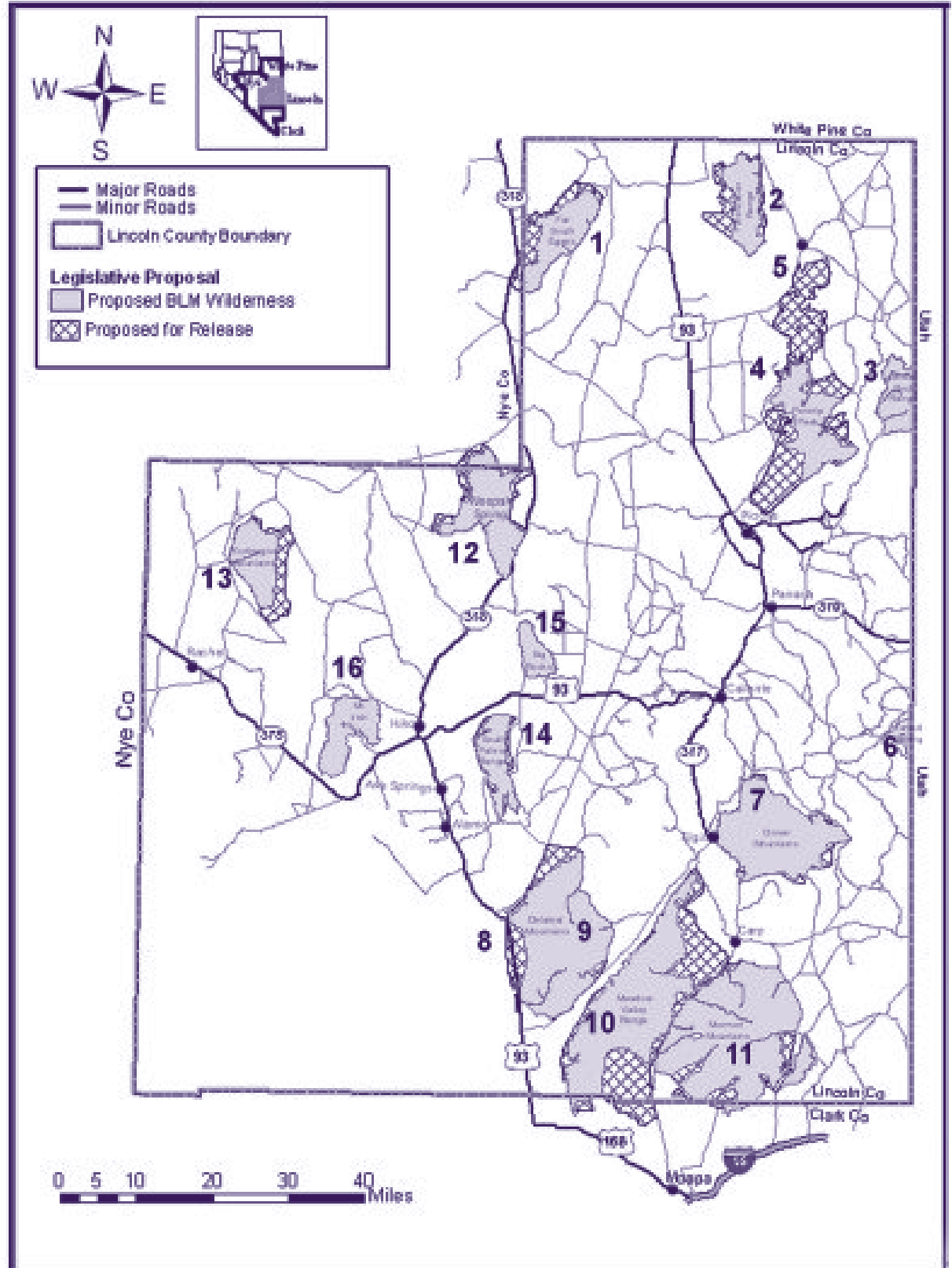
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Mission Statement

Keeping Nevada Wild!

Friends of Nevada Wilderness is dedicated to preserving all qualified Nevada public lands as Wilderness, protecting all potential Wilderness from ongoing threats including mining, over-grazing, road construction, and off-road vehicle use, educating the public on the values of – and need for – Wilderness, and improving the management and restoration of these public wild lands.





Nevada's Congressional delegation comments on aspects of the bill

Here are a few quotes and statements from Nevada's Congressional delegation on the Lincoln County bill. From June 16, 2004

"The Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act represents a comprehensive plan that balances the needs for infrastructure development, recreation opportunities, and conservation of our natural resources and public lands in Lincoln County, Nevada," said Senator Reid. "We do not expect everyone to advocate every provision of this bill. In fact, I don't imagine that anyone will champion every provision of this bill."

Reid goes on to discuss the variety of opinions and reactions to this bill: "The only common thread in these views is that they are perspectives passionately held by Nevadans. I hope this context illustrates why compromise is not just desirable but necessary."

"When the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act was signed into law, it was my hope that it would serve as a blueprint for other bills beneficial to Nevada's environment," Senator John Ensign said.

Representative Shelley Berkley said, "This bipartisan legislative package strikes a careful balance between the need for additional resources to meet the demands of southern Nevada and a desire to spur economic development and expand the tax base in Lincoln County. I am pleased that this bill designates important wilderness areas that will be protected as open space for future generations and provides funding and thousands of acres of BLM land to create more parks and trails in Lincoln County."

"We do not expect everyone to advocate every provision of this bill. In fact, I don't imagine that anyone will champion every provision of this bill."
—Senator Harry Reid

"A product of compromise, this bill will expand the tax base by allowing for more private development in Lincoln County where the federal government controls over 98 percent of the land now," said Congressman Gibbons. "At the same time, we will protect thousands of acres of wilderness while also promoting public access to public lands through the creation of a designated off-highway vehicle trail for residents and visitors to enjoy. This is a good bill for Lincoln County, and I look forward to its passage."

Wilderness provides refuge for endangered animal and plant species, protects vital watersheds to ensure a high quality water supply for life in and out of wilderness areas and provides much needed inspiration for the American psyche. As the nation becomes more populated, and open spaces more difficult to find, the once intimidating expanse of Nevada has come to signify freedom.
— Outrock

Legend for map, opposite page

WILDERNESS AREA	ACRES DESIGNATED	ACRES RELEASED
Wilderness Study Areas		
1 Far South Egans	36,384	16,195
2 Fortifications Range	28,837	13,574
3 White Rock Range	24,413	125
4 Parsnip Peak	45,837	44,078
5 Table Mountain	0	35,958
6 Tunnel Spring	5,530	0
7 Clover Mountains	85,757	4,993
8 Evergreen A, B, and C	0	2,694
9 Delamar Mountains	111,389	19,021
10 Meadow Valley Range	124,833	60,910
11 Mormon Mountains	153,939	16,875
12 Weepah Springs	51,117	11,524
13 Worthington Mountains	30,936	14,892
14 South Pahroc Range	25,638	4,677
Citizen Areas		
15 Big Rocks	13,913	0
16 Mt. Irish	31,088	0
Total	769,611	245,516



A long road travelled

Eastern Nevada wilderness campaign

By Brian Beffort and Shaaron Netherton

In 2001, while Friends of Nevada Wilderness and the Nevada Wilderness Coalition were focused largely on negotiating the Clark County Conservation of Public Land and Natural Resources Act of 2002, representatives from the Tri-Counties (Lincoln, White Pine and Nye) began meeting to discuss wilderness and other public-lands issues in the region. They shared their concerns with Nevada's Congressional delegation, who expressed interest in addressing these issues after the Clark County bill was enacted. The delegation encouraged stakeholders to begin discussing issues.

Lincoln and White Pine counties formed technical review teams (TRTs) to bring concerned stakeholders together to discuss issues involving wilderness designation. Members of the Lincoln County TRT included county commissioners, staff from UNR's Cooperative Extension, Nevada Division of Wildlife, concerned citizens, as well as Hermi and John Hiatt representing Red Rock Audubon (and also board members of Friends of Nevada Wilderness), Brian Beffort, whose grandmother was born and raised in Panaca, and Bart Koehler of the Wilderness Society.

In December 2001, Senators Ensign and Reid issued an invitation to the TRT to expand discussions "beyond the treatment of Wilderness Study Areas to address other public land and economic development issues in this important region."

Throughout 2002 and into 2003, the TRT met at least monthly in Alamo, Pioche and Caliente and sponsored field trips to the Mormon and Meadow Valley mountains and the Parsnip Peak WSAs.

Hermi Hiatt remembered the hostility shown by many locals toward the wilderness folks on the team. But as time went on, she said trust began to build on both sides.

"We found that we weren't very far apart on what we wanted — to see the landscape stay the same way it had always been," she said. "The en-

vironmental community wanted to see long-term legal protection of wilderness, but many locals felt that the lands would stay protected without it."

"It was an interesting experience for me," said Brian Beffort. "Not only was it valuable to see the country where my grandmother grew up, we

were negotiating with several of my distant cousins. They might have been happier to meet me if discussions hadn't been so politically charged."

Although discussions were often heated and produced few agreements on boundaries and other specifics, both sides learned a lot. Wilderness advocates learned the spe-

cific, on-the-ground concerns of locals about wilderness designation in their backyards. Lincoln County residents were able to replace many of their fears and rumors with facts about what wilderness designation allows and prohibits.

Although TRT discussions produced no consensus on wilderness, we all participated in Democracy at its most vital — face-to-face discussions among citizens about issues of concern to all, which are necessary steps to finding political-solutions.

The TRT discussions helped shape the Wilderness Coalition's Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Lincoln and White Pine Counties, which we presented to the Congressional delegation and the public in June, 2003. It highlights about 2.5 million acres in Lincoln County with high wilderness values. Other stakeholders, including Lincoln County and the Nevada Mining Association, submitted their wilderness and public lands proposals to the Congressional delegation. The delegation then balanced everyone's proposals to draft the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act.

Not once during the TRT's discussions did water development or pipelines ever come up. See *John Hiatt's article on Las Vegas water on page 11.*



Pristine forever,
now and for the
unborn. Let us
keep these
miracles, these
splendors
pristine forever,
these sources of
man's spirit,
symbols of his
goals,
landscapes
eternally of
freedom.

—Nancy Newhall



Delamar Mountains proposed wilderness area.



How you can help improve the bill

Please write the Nevada Congressional delegation and urge them to add the following to the Lincoln County bill:

Wilderness

✓ The entire 2.5-million-acre Citizens' Wilderness Proposal for Lincoln County should be designated. In particular, the Pahrangat Range should be included in this bill, to protect its incredible archaeology.

✓ This bill should include wilderness designation for the ecologically-significant Desert National Wildlife Range lands managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

✓ This bill needs to reserve explicit wilderness water rights.

Other issues

✓ All water pipeline rights-of-way should be removed from this bill.

✓ The water study needs to be expanded for all of eastern Nevada.

✓ Before Las Vegas relies on rural water to support its burgeoning growth, a thorough analysis must be completed on all water-conservation op-

tions available to commercial and residential sectors in Las Vegas. Extreme drought measures should be instigated immediately in southern Nevada to reduce water consumption.

Other things to do

✓ Whether water ever flows in these proposed pipelines is a state, NOT a federal, decision. It is critical to become active in the upcoming state legislative session and be on the alert for more attempts by Vidler Water and others to make it easier to broker water. It is CRITICAL to inform the state water engineer that inter-basin water transfer is a bad idea for the arid West.

✓ Get involved to help protect rural water from future water grabs.

Contact these groups for information.

☞ Ad Hoc Water Group, c/o Joe Edsen at (775) 348-7557.

☞ Sierra Club, c/o Dennis Ghiglieri (775) 329-6118. www.toiyabe.sierraclub.org

SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Reno Gazette Journal
rgjmail@rgj.com

Las Vegas Review
Journal
letters@lvrij.com

Las Vegas Sun
lvsun.com/opinion

Nevada's Congressional Leaders

Note: Due to the discovery of ricin and anthrax at Washington senate buildings, mail to DC may face serious delays. Use Nevada addresses or fax instead.

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Representative Jon Porter

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Hikers at Weepah Springs proposed wilderness



Explaining the titles in the bill

By Shaaron Netherton

TITLE I – FEDERAL LAND SALES –

The first part of this title redirects the BLM to auction about 13,373 acres on the outskirts of Mesquite, on the Utah border. Congress mandated

this sale in the Lincoln County Land Act of 2000. This title renders moot a recent court decision directing the BLM to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) before selling the land.

Although this bill establishes corridors and rights-of-way, it will not transfer water. Only the State Water Engineer has this authority.

The second part authorizes the BLM

to sell up to 87,005 acres of BLM land mostly adjacent to Caliente, Panaca, Alamo, Pioche, Hiko, Rachel and Carp. The BLM can stop sale of 10,000 of these acres to protect sensitive resources. Land will be sold to the highest bidders at annual auctions for not less than fair market value. Proceeds from these annual auctions would be distributed to benefit education, economic development and resource management. Currently, 98% of Lincoln County is public land.

While we support some public lands being sold for community expansion and other reasons, this acreage seems excessive. Maps on our web site show specific locations. Regardless of whether this legislation is passed or not, the BLM is currently working on a Resource Management Plan (RMP) that will address similar land sales in Lincoln County. Money from land sales conducted under the RMP would go into the general treasury and would not be available for resource management or other uses in state.

TITLE II – WILDERNESS – Separate Article

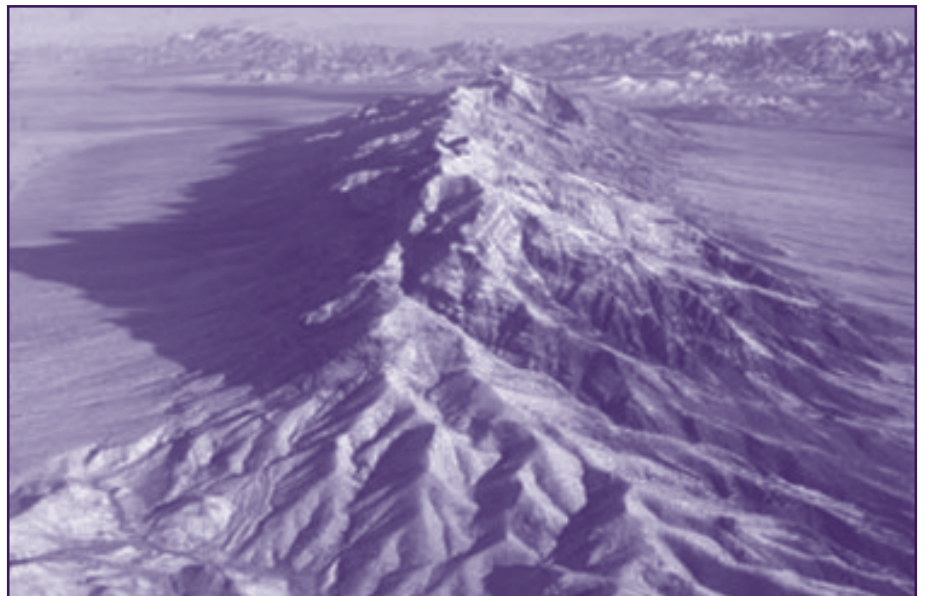
TITLE III – UTILITY CORRIDORS –

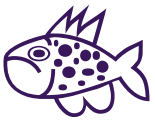
This is the title that many citizens and organizations (including Friends of Nevada Wilderness) strongly oppose. It would establish utility corridors for the Southern Nevada Water Authority (256 miles) and the Lincoln County Water District/Vidler Water (192 miles). After National Environmental Policy Act compliance, the bill would designate rights-of-way for water pipelines, etc., to convey water in Clark and Lincoln counties. All corridors and rights-of-way would be along major roads. None would be in wilderness. The bill also authorizes a U.S. Geological Survey/Desert Research Institute water resource study for White Pine County.

Although this bill establishes corridors and rights-of-way, it will not transfer water. Only the State Water Engineer has this authority. Regardless of whether this legislation is passed or not, the BLM is currently working on a Resource Management Plan (RMP) that will address similar utility corridors. The BLM regularly issues rights-of-way for powerlines, fiber optic cables, gas and water pipelines through its normal BLM regulations. These proposed water pipeline rights-of-way could and would be granted by the BLM without legislation.



The Nevada Bureau of Land Management has online information about Wilderness study areas www.nv.blm.gov/wilderness displays information on all the wilderness study areas (WSAs) in the state including maps that show grazing allotments, spring developments, land ownership, etc. There are several maps per area as well as a several page write-up for each of the WSAs.





one at a time

Friends of Nevada Wilderness, the broader environmental community and many rural residents see Las Vegas' demand for water as a fight that will not go away. It will be critical in the coming years for all citizens who want to protect rural Nevada's water from metropolitan areas to be vigilant in opposing inter-basin water transfers at the state legislature and to the State Water Engineer, where such decisions are made.

The bill would also move an undeveloped right-of-way on the east side of Highway 93 to an ex-



Photos, from left: Worthington Mountains, White Rock and South Pahrocs proposed wilderness areas.



isting utility corridor on the west side, between Highway 168 and Kane Springs Road. Coyote Springs Investment (Harvey Whittemore), the owner of the private property to the east of Highway 93, will pay the federal government for the appreciated value of the property because of the removal of the right-of-way.

Although this transfer would make little difference on the ground, it could be advantageous for the developer anyway. Friends of Nevada Wilderness would like to see the entire 43,000-acre Coyote Springs property back in public ownership instead of becoming the largest master-planned community in southern Nevada, with up to 125,000 homes and 10 golf courses. This community would be very close to the "Big Four" wilderness areas (the Mormon, Delamar, Meadow Valley and Clover WSAs). The development of this community

is another reason why these areas need to become wilderness before there's too little left to save.

TITLE IV – SILVER STATE OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE TRAIL

The bill would establish a 260-mile Silver State Off-Highway Vehicle Trail along a series of existing back-country roads that are currently open and used by OHV enthusiasts. None of the trail would enter wilderness, although several miles would follow the boundary of the proposed Big Rocks Wilderness Area. The bill requires a management plan be prepared and allows the BLM to close trails to protect

people and natural resources.

TITLE V – STATE & COUNTY PARKS

This title would allow the BLM to convey up to 4,851 acres of land to expand Cathedral Gorge, Beaver Dam and Kershaw Ryan state parks. The bill would also allow for BLM to convey up to 14,330 acres to the county for the conservation of natural resources or public parks. These are mostly along highways or near the Silver State OHV Trail.

TITLE VI – JURISDICTION TRANS-

FERS – This title would transfer about 8,503 acres of BLM land to Desert National Wildlife Range, giving these lands better environmental protection. About 8,382 acres of DNWR land would be transferred to the BLM to facilitate the Coyote Spring utility corridor and would have little environmental impact.

Here you will find countless peaks and valleys, deserts and lakes, wildlife and the stillness of the vast basin and range.

Silence. A great spacial silence – is pure in the basin and range. It is a soundless immensity with mountains in it. You're alone with god in that silence.

– John McPhee



What's at stake?

Eastern Nevada Groundwater

By Tom Myers, hydrologist and former Conservation Director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness

Driving through the arid valleys of eastern Nevada, it is hard to imagine that there may be vast amounts of water lying hundreds or thousands of feet underground. But there is, and the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA) wants much of it to allow Las Vegas to continue growing.

In their natural state, all aquifers (water-bearing geologic formations) are in equilibrium, with inflow equaling outflow. Inflow recharges the aquifer through snowmelt percolating into the mountain bedrock or floodwaters soaking into streambanks. Outflow depletes the aquifer through plant transpiration, springs, streams and possibly the intermittent lakes that form on playas around the state.

Add wells to the aquifer, start pumping water out, and the outflow increases. In turn, this eventually lowers the water table. With recharge staying the same (as it must unless the climate becomes wetter), pumping wells eventually take water from wetlands, springs and streams. This might take a while, because the wells could be far from the springs, streams and other natural discharge points.

The deep carbonate aquifer is fractured bedrock that underlies much of eastern Nevada, from the Ruby Mountains south and west to Death Valley. Fractures in the bedrock, such as faults along mountain ranges, affect the flow because they are thousands of times more permeable than solid rock.

Springs in Ash Meadows, along the Amargosa River, in Death Valley, the Muddy and White rivers, and Pahrangat Valley all result from deep carbonate water. The aquifer could have been recharged hundreds of miles to the north, but because fractures transmit water quickly, the water might have traveled those hundreds of miles in just a few decades.

The thickness of the rock and the high water flows in some of these places can give the impression that water can be pumped for decades without impact. But deep pumping may lower the water level in the aquifer, drying springs and streams, just as opening the drain in a bathtub lowers its water level.

It is not a matter of whether developing this aquifer will impact other resources (e.g., springs, streams, wildlife habitat and water availability to local communities), but when it will happen. Only

detailed and long-term studies will allow scientists to predict the impacts that could occur from differing levels of development.

Ultimately, the public must determine whether the negative impacts of groundwater development are an acceptable trade-off for furthering growth in southern Nevada.

Who decides water flows?

The Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act of 2004 would allow 448 miles of water pipelines to be built across public lands in Lincoln and Clark counties. Whether the water flows through these pipelines will be a decision for the state water engineer, because water allocation is controlled by the state, not the federal government. The Bill affirms the state's jurisdiction in this matter. — *FNW foot note.*

The scoop on Lincoln County water politics

Several years ago, Lincoln County and Vidler Water entered into a questionable water agreement in which Vidler paid Lincoln County \$2 million dollars. However, in 2003 the Nevada Attorney General's Office made a determination that counties did not have the legal authority to make these kinds of water agreements. During the 2003 legislative session, Vidler Water and their 18 paid lobbyists worked to make it easier to sell water in Nevada.

State Senate Bill 487 was introduced, making it legal for most of Nevada's counties to enter into water selling agreements. This bill was defeated. However, at the end of the legislative session, Vidler Water, representing Lincoln County, pushed through State Senate Bill 336. This bill, signed into law by Governor Guinn on June 11, 2003, created the Lincoln County Water District (controlled by the Lincoln County Commissioners) and gave them legal authority to enter into water agreements and to sell water outside of the county as well as outside of the state. The Lincoln County Commission / Vidler Water is now asking for hundreds of miles of water pipelines to be constructed in Lincoln County.



A heartfelt Thank You to all the Friends of Nevada Wilderness new members, and longtime supporting members.



Water in the Las Vegas Valley

By John Hiatt

The Las Vegas Valley Water District (LVVWD) and other water merchants in the Las Vegas Valley have long coveted the groundwater resources of Lincoln, Nye and White Pine Counties. In 1989, the LVVWD filed applications with the State Water Engineer asking for all unappropriated groundwater in most of Lincoln and parts of Nye and White Pine Counties. A storm of protest followed.

As a result of the protests and a study detailing just how expensive it would be to construct the infrastructure to move the water, LVVWD asked the State Engineer to delay action on its applications but retain its seniority in filing. There the situation rested as the LVVWD worked to get more water from the Colorado River. This strategy was sufficient to meet the short-term (measured in years rather than decades) needs of the Las Vegas Valley.

In 2001, two factors dramatically changed the picture. The Bureau of Reclamation, which manages the river, and its ultimate boss, Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton, recognized that the rapidly growing population in the West would soon need all the water the Colorado River could provide, and then some.

The first step in meeting future obligations would be to get each state using more than its allotment of water from the river to reduce its reliance on the river. California has long overused its allotment by some 800,000 acre-feet per year. Nevada was just starting to exceed its allotment. Arizona would take its allotment within a few years. Thus a new legal agreement, the Quantification Settlement Agreement, was born.

After much teeth gnashing, wrangling, missed deadlines and the threat of an immediate cutback to allotment limits, California finally signed the agreement in September 2003. This agreement stipulates that each overusing State has a 15-year grace period to reduce consumption to its statutory allotment, provided there is sufficient storage in the river's reservoirs to meet demand. Storage levels were established that defined how much water over and above the allotments could be taken from the river.

The current drought in the West started in 2000 and appears to have peaked in 2002, with the low-

est precipitation levels since the start of record keeping. The continuing drought has lowered reservoir levels on the Colorado faster than anyone anticipated. By the end of 2004, Lake Mead is expected to reach its key trigger level, a surface elevation of 1,125 feet above sea level. According to the agreement, this level means Nevada will only be able to use 300,000 acre-feet of Colorado River water in 2005. Nevada took about 275,000 acre-feet from the River in 2003 and will probably take the same or a little more this year.

However, the Las Vegas Valley continues to be the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the country. Even with a major push for water conservation, the valley's master water merchant, the Southern Nevada Water Authority (SNWA), will not be able to meet demand without finding additional sources of water. Hence, an accelerated effort to obtain new water supplies. With neighboring states either unable or unwilling to provide water, the only alternative is to use Nevada water.

As a result of the approaching water crisis, the SNWA is trying to secure additional water supplies as soon as possible.

In 2003, the SNWA asked the Nevada Congressional delegation to designate pipeline rights-of-way across federal (BLM) land. The delegation, already thinking about a Lincoln County Public Lands Bill to address other issues, was receptive to the idea. Fast-forward to today, when a bill has been introduced to do just that.

The bill includes only pipeline corridors in Clark and Lincoln Counties, but clearly those corridors are laid out and pointed north to tap the largest aquifers, which are in White Pine County.

Although the ultimate decision about how much groundwater can be pumped from Lincoln and White Pine counties will be made by the State Water Engineer, the race to obtain that water and pump it to Las Vegas is in high gear.

Silence. A great spacial silence – is pure in the basin and range. It is a soundless immensity with mountains in it. You're alone with god in that silence.

– John McPhee



Big Rocks proposed wilderness area