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Push to sell federal land panned

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Stung by the House's overhaul of the Endangered Species Act earlier this fall, environmentalists are digging in as they prepare to battle a congressman's plan to sell off federal land to raise up to \$148 billion for hurricane relief.

In late September, Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., introduced legislation that would auction off 15 percent of the government's 654 million acres, much of it in national forests and wildlife refuges, to the highest bidders. His bill, HR 3855, would exclude national parks.

Will Adams, Tancredo's press secretary, said the congressman has been promised a hearing sometime this fall in the House Resources Committee by its chairman, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Stockton. A dozen other Congress members have signed on to the bill, including Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, an Orange County Republican.

"We don't have a date or anything like that, but we do have a commitment," Adams said.

Whatever that date turns out to be, environmentalists are committed to being there. While they support rebuilding New Orleans and other cities devastated by Hurricane Katrina, they suggest there is a better way to pay for that.

"Paying for Katrina is a huge problem, obviously," said Dan Silver, executive director for the Endangered Habitats League in Los Angeles. "Some people have talked about a windfall profit tax on the oil companies. That might be a good place to start."

Katrina aside, selling off federal land, particularly in heavily urbanized Southern California, would be nothing short of disastrous, Silver said.

"I think we would be squandering our future, really, if we were to rush to sell off lands in this manner," he said.

Using a disaster?

Silver said he doubts the underlying motive is to help Katrina victims.

"They probably have wanted to do this for a long time and they are using this disaster for an excuse. That's what I suspect," Silver said. "And this disaster shouldn't be used in that way."

David Hogan, urban wildlands program director for the Center for Biological Diversity in San Diego, was more blunt.

"Couching the bill as hurricane relief is an extraordinarily cynical maneuver by private property rights fanatics," Hogan said. "This is really just the latest move by these extremists to undo more than 100 years of land and water conservation on federal properties. The primary motivation behind this bill is to deliver precious natural lands into the eager hands of developers and land speculators."

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Adams laughed when he read Hogan's statement.

"Wasn't our country founded on the right to own private property?" Adams asked. "I doubt that we are the extremists here. The extremists are the ones who want the government to continue to own the majority of the West."

He was referring to the high rate of federal ownership in Western states, including 84 percent of land in Nevada, 69 percent of Alaska, 57 percent of Utah, 53 percent of Oregon, 50 percent of Idaho, 48 percent of Arizona, 45 percent of California, 42 percent of Wyoming and New Mexico, and 37 percent in Colorado.

Adams said the Colorado congressman was not taking advantage of the disaster that crippled the Gulf Coast. He said

Katrina, rather, brought into sharp focus the need to increase revenue at a time when spending is soaring because of the war in Iraq, natural disasters and President Bush's prescription drug program.

"This year has been sort of a jaw-dropping year in terms of the budget," Adams said.

Full throttle

As far as environmentalists are concerned, it's the bill that's jaw-dropping. The legislation would direct the agriculture secretary to select 15 percent of national forest land for sale. It also would direct the secretary of the interior to target 15 percent of lands managed by that agency, excluding national parks and Indian reservations.

The deadline for completing the inventory would be Oct. 1, 2006. The land put up for sale would have to be concentrated in those states where federal ownership exceeds 15 percent ---- in other words, the West. None of the states east of the Rockies reaches that threshold.

Sales proceeds would go into a disaster relief fund. As well, the bill would bar the federal government from acquiring any more land.

"Sagebrush rebel" lawmakers from the West frequently propose similar legislation but rarely get anywhere. Tancredo, however, is hoping the government's fiscal woes will raise his bill's prospects of passage.

Many observers suggest this latest attempt won't go anywhere, either, but Hogan maintains it has a better chance than others because of the current political climate.

"Last year, this would have been laughable," Hogan said. "But the extreme right is going full throttle now on dismantling American's conservation laws and protected land areas."

He cited the House's passage in late September of legislation that would dramatically scale back the scope of the landmark 1973 Endangered Species Act.

If the Tancredo legislation were to pass, the congressman said the sale of 15 percent of the government's property portfolio, or 98 million acres, would pump up to \$148 billion into the U.S. Treasury. He based his estimate on the average value of the nation's farms and ranches: \$1,510 per acre.

"The federal government may be cash-poor, but it is land-rich," said Tancredo, who represents suburban and rural counties south and west of Denver. "There is demand for farm and ranch land, and the federal government should have long ago transferred its massive holdings to the private sector, where it can be put to use."

Lining up

Environmentalists disagree. If it wasn't for national forests like the Cleveland and San Bernardino, they say, the urban sprawl that has consumed much of Southern California would have raged unchecked.

Selling off 15 percent of the Cleveland, for example, would open up huge tracts of environmentally sensitive lands that until now have been locked up precisely because they are federal lands, environmentalists say.

"If that started happening in Southern California, developers would start lining up and putting in their bids," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Joshua Tree.

"I'm having trouble finding the problem with that," countered Adams. "At the end of the day, if we are able to open up more land where there is a high demand for it, then so be it."

But Patterson said opening up national forest and Bureau of Land Management land in Southern California would be a huge mistake.

Take the Cleveland National Forest, for example, he said. It meanders through the Santa Ana Mountains of western Riverside County, the Palomar Mountain area along the Riverside-San Diego county line and the mountains near Ramona and Julian. It has been carved up substantially since its creation a century ago, and many pieces are not contiguous.

The forest is so fractured and so fragile that a sale could cripple its usefulness as a lifeline for dozens of imperiled species of plants and animals, including the mountain lion, Patterson said.

"The Cleveland is just a bunch of little chunks," he said.

When created in 1908 by former President Theodore Roosevelt, the forest spanned 1.9 million acres. Over the decades, it has been whittled to 424,000 acres.

'The sky is falling'

It's not just the environment that would suffer. Hogan said residents would lose opportunities for camping, hunting and hiking.

"Southern Californians' quality of life would be radically reduced if the last open natural lands were converted into sprawling subdivisions," Hogan said.

However, Borre Winckel, executive director for the Riverside County Chapter of the Building Industry Association of Southern California, dismisses environmentalists' concerns as "sky is falling" rhetoric.

"In the Western states, the federal government owns enormous amounts of property," Winckel said. "So, for environmentalists to suggest that the sky is falling is simply not true. Besides, the private sector would not be interested in properties that aren't developable anyway."

Bruce Colbert, executive director for the Property Owners Association of Riverside County, said much forest land is so rugged it could not be built on.

"I don't know many housing tracts that are built on slopes as steep as those in the Cleveland National Forest," Colbert said.

Winckel added that a title change would not relieve a property owner of the obligation under federal and state law to avoid harming endangered species.

On the other hand, a sell-off could take some pressure off the home building industry, which is struggling to keep pace with demand at a time when housing affordability is at an all-time low, he said.

"We are artificially constrained Southern California-wide because we have so much land locked up in state and federal holdings," Winckel said. "Were lands to be freed up, it would have a very positive impact on the Southern California housing market."

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