

Sen. Bennett Optimistic About Wilderness Bill

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Has Hesitant Support of Environmental Groups, Developers

(KCPW News) Senator Bob Bennett is optimistic his plan to designate nearly 265,000 acres in rapidly growing Washington County as federal wilderness will win congressional approval this year. A similar bill didn't make it out of committee in time during 2006. Bennett says the breakthrough for the bill came when both environmental groups and developers realized they would not get everything they wanted, but still decided to support it.

"It was a hard thing for some of the local people in Washington County because it does go farther than many of them wanted," said the senator. "It has been a long, hard negotiation with some of the environmental groups because it does not go as far as some of them have wanted."

In addition to the wilderness designation, the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act also creates two conservation areas totaling 140,000 acres inhabited by the endangered desert tortoise. Off-roaders would have to stay on designated routes on this land.

The bill allows the Bureau of Land Management to sell just over 9,000 acres in the county, but the proceeds must go toward further land acquisition, education and conservation projects. Dave Livermore, state director for the Nature Conservancy, says this will allow the BLM to "trade up."

"There won't be any acreage sold that has endangered species or archaeological sites," said Livermore. "In other words, these are surplus lands; the intent essentially is to trade up, to convert these assets into additional conservation around the county."

On the development side, the bill is supported by the Washington County Commission. Congressman Jim Matheson will introduce the bill in the House of Representatives. For more information and maps of the proposed wilderness and conservation areas, visit [Senator Bennett's web site](#). You can also listen to a conversation with the senator and Dave Livermore on the [Midday Metro page](#).