

# The Register-Guard

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Opinion

## Palmer: Wildlands win worthy protections

By Tim Palmer

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By a vote of 92-8 on Feb. 12 the U.S. Senate passed the Oregon Wildlands Act as part of a jam-packed public lands bill promising benefits to Americans in virtually every state. On Feb. 26 the House passed the same bill as the National Resources Management Act with a vote of 363-62, sending it to the president's desk.

Our senators and representatives crafted a complex law to include new parklands, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, historic sites and natural areas deemed off-limits to destructive mining.

Of course this didn't happen overnight. Thousands of local citizens have waged campaigns to protect these cherished landscapes over the last decade or more, and the agreements to set these national treasures aside didn't come without wrangling and compromise.

But Oregon's Senator Ron Wyden — one of the measure's chief architects — and Senator Jeff Merkley kept their eyes on the prize and delivered a bill with a legacy that will be appreciated long after Americans' much-publicized political differences are forgotten. Representative Peter DeFazio — whose district includes key areas in the new legislation — likewise championed the bill in the House with a long-standing commitment to safeguard Wasson Creek, the Chetco River and other places he credited among “the most beautiful, pristine, and ecologically diverse areas in Oregon.”

Oregon is a big winner because nearly all our congressional members know that the health of our rivers and natural areas are important to everyone. A few critics along the way argued against the safeguards, saying that the bill would inhibit efforts to fight wildfires in the future, but the statute does not bar federal officials from taking necessary action.

The bill included the stunningly wild haunts of Devil's Staircase (Wasson Creek) for protection in the central Coast Range. The upper Molalla became a rare example of a lower-elevation Cascade Range stream safeguarded in the National Wild and Scenic Rives system, which emphasizes keeping rivers and their immediate corridors the way they are. The crystalline Chetco — the wildest river on the West Coast south of Washington's Olympic Peninsula — is finally spared of destructive mining threats that have plagued its exquisite waters for decades.

Sixteen stellar tributaries of the Rogue River Canyon will be added to the Wild and Scenic Rivers estate, helping to safeguard them from recurrent threats of clearcutting and mining. A proposed wilderness expansion in the canyon was, however, retracted from the bill in a political compromise with Oregon's one Republican congressman.

The pristine upper Elk River on the South Coast was recognized with Wild and Scenic status for several tributaries — essential to pure cold flows that our imperiled salmon and steelhead desperately need — and the Frank and Jeanne Moore Wild Salmon Special Management Area in the North Umpqua River basin was recognized as an irreplaceable refuge for native fish.

Most important at the national level, after 54 years of temporary status the Land and Water Conservation Fund was made permanent. This is a key mechanism in acquiring and protecting critical open spaces and recreation areas all over America.

This act of Congress stands in contrast to recent threats that would erode our government's commitment to safeguard the public lands belonging to all of us. Those perils have ranged from the out-of-state-militia standoff at Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016 to the threat of faceless international corporations strip-mining our Siskiyou Mountains for nickel (a danger to streams and watersheds in southwest Oregon that must still be addressed). The resounding vote for conservation in both the Senate and House reminds us that the stewardship of public land is a cause that binds Americans together.

The approval in both branches of Congress offers hope that there is still common ground in our country. It's fitting that the political terrain we shared in the passage of this bill is literally terrain in the realm of public land where our elected officials have agreed to conserve some of the best of America for all the generations to come.

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