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## Wilderness proposal gets new life in Congress

BY MIKE LEE

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Proponents of open space are hoping the second time is a charm for a federal wilderness proposal that covers more than 21,000 acres in North County.

It doesn't hurt that the bill is sponsored by Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, whose star is rising in Washington, D.C.

"He is an influential member of the Republican Party. He's a mover and a shaker and we certainly hope it will help," said Ryan Henson, senior policy director for the California Wilderness Coalition.

The Beauty Mountain and Agua Tibia Act of 2011 would add 7,796 acres of public land to the existing Agua Tibia Wilderness and will expand the Beauty Mountain Wilderness by an additional 13,635 acres.

Agua Tibia is enjoyed by thousands of hikers and equestrians each year who travel through it on the rugged Cutca Trail. Beauty Mountain is described by wilderness advocates as a "scenic jewel draped in chaparral, fascinating rock formations and oak woodlands."

Issa's bill is a repeat of 2009 legislation. While that failed to pass Congress, portions of Beauty Mountain and Agua Tibia in Riverside County were protected as wilderness in 2009 by legislation sponsored by Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs, and signed into law by President Barack Obama.



JOHN GASTALDO / P>

Supporters of open space in San Diego County are hopeful that a new bill to expand federal wilderness areas in the region will pass Congress this session.

Issa's bill was one of two wild lands protection measures offered by California congressmen on the first day of the 112th Congress. The other would conserve about 18,000 acres in the San Gabriel Mountains in the Angeles and San Bernardino national forests.

"This legislation will protect and preserve lands for use by current and future generations," Issa said. "I'm asking for the public to review and share their ideas so that this wilderness area is created in full consultation with those who will enjoy the benefits of protecting this land and live near it."

To qualify for wilderness status, lands must already be federal property controlled by the Forest Service, the National Park Service and other agencies. Wilderness parcels generally exclude roads, buildings and power lines. After an area is designated as wilderness, the agencies can no longer reconfigure land-use plans to include development such as off-road vehicle courses, backcountry resorts and logging operations.


But wilderness areas do attract hikers who want to get away from it all.

"This bill will not only enhance the local tourism economy—very important to us as a hospitality industry business—and improve recreation opportunities, but it will ensure that magnificent scenery and rich wildlife habitat are conserved for the future," said Jim Stillwell, the General Manager of Warner Springs Ranch Resort in North County.

*Mike Lee: (619)293-2034; mike.lee@uniontrib.com. Follow on Twitter @sdenvirobeat.*

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