

Monuments and oranges

Salazar's order and a proposed Siskiyou Crest monument have little connection

February 03, 2011 2:00 AM

When Rep. Greg Walden addressed a group of protestors gathered at the Jackson County Courthouse Tuesday, he addressed two issues: a proposed Siskiyou Crest National Monument and an order issued in December by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. One has virtually nothing to do with the other.

The Antiquities Act of 1906 gives the president of the United States — only the president, not Salazar or anyone else — the authority to establish national monuments to protect public resources. President Bill Clinton did so when he created the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in 2000.

Salazar's order, on the other hand, does something much less dramatic.

You wouldn't know that to read a letter to Salazar from Walden and 56 other members of Congress. The letter accuses Salazar of "an underhanded attempt ... to circumvent Congress and the federal rulemaking process."

In 2003, President George W. Bush's interior secretary, Gale Norton, issued an order of her own. It essentially directed the Bureau of Land Management to stop doing what it had been doing for years: protecting land that Congress might one day consider for wilderness designation.

Salazar's order restores the BLM's historic mission of managing land for multiple uses, including oil and gas leasing, logging, grazing and public recreation. The order says nothing about national monuments. Read Secretarial Order 3310 online at <http://tinyurl.com/28yteyo>.

The proposed Siskiyou Crest National Monument would cover 600,000 acres along the Oregon-California border, stretching from Mount Ashland nearly to Cave Junction and from near Ruch to the Klamath River.

Whether such a monument should be created is a matter for another day. It is worth asking, as Walden does, whether a presidential proclamation is the proper vehicle for protecting such a large swath of land.

But there is no indication such a declaration is forthcoming anytime soon. And even if it were, the BLM would have less to say about it than the U.S. Forest Service. The proposed monument includes more national forest than BLM land, and the Forest Service is part of the Agriculture Department, not Interior.

As for Salazar's order, it is carefully worded to emphasize balancing wildland protection against "uses that may impair wilderness characteristics."

The order directs the BLM to identify areas of land with wilderness characteristics worthy of protection in the public interest. It also allows BLM officials to decide that "uses that may impair

wilderness characteristics" can take precedence over preservation in some cases.

Contrary to Walden's claim that the process would involve "no public input at all," the order clearly directs BLM managers to maintain a database accessible to the public listing all lands the agency identifies as possessing wilderness characteristics. And the public will have an opportunity to participate in creating management plans for those lands.

The BLM cannot create wilderness areas on its own; only Congress can do that. Salazar's order seeks only to identify land that might be worth preserving in case Congress someday decides to create new wilderness areas or expand existing ones.

That doesn't sound like "an underhanded attempt to circumvent Congress." It sounds like a public land agency doing its job.