

RESIDENTS WANT BIG CHANGES IN BIG SUR BILL; CONGRESSMAN RESPONDS

By CHRIS COUNTS

AMONG ITS attributes, the Big Sur Forest Service Management Unit Act would offer more environmental protection for wildlands in Big Sur. But a homeowners group is worried that local residents could become an endangered species if the bill is enacted.

The Coast Property Owners Association is asking Congressman Sam Farr to make “substantial changes” to the bill in exchange for the group’s support of it. In response, Farr insisted that not only are many of the group’s fears unfounded, but he said the bill offers a variety of benefits for the Big Sur community. Still, the congressman said he will work to address the group’s concerns.

The bill — H.R. 4040 — was introduced by Farr Nov. 6, 2009. In addition to creating “a division of the Los Padres National Forest, with its own source of funding,” the bill would designate portions of five local rivers as “Wild and Scenic,” add 2,287 acres to wilderness areas, create a Wildland Urban

Interface Special Study Area to “demonstrate fire prevention methods,” and create the Arroyo Seco-Indians National Recreational Trail and the 65-acre Jeff Norman Botanical Area.

Should the feds keep buying land?

At the core of the CPOA’s objection to the bill is its members’ belief that the continued expansion of public lands in Big Sur is coming at the expense of the local community.

The group has repeatedly charged that the federal government is continuing to acquire land in Big Sur in excess of limits imposed by the law. According to the CPOA, about one-third of the private land in Big Sur — roughly 20,000 acres — has been purchased by government agencies since 1984.

“Many in Big Sur are concerned about the community’s long-term survival if the acquisitions continue,” reads a Feb. 10 letter the CPOA sent to Farr.

Farr, though, insisted the federal government has no intention of buying up Big Sur neighborhoods. “We don’t buy land outside

of the forest boundaries,” Farr told The Pine Cone this week.

He also defended the previous expansions of wilderness land in Big Sur, which he said protected the land from “logging, mining, grazing and other industrial uses.”

The bill, he explained, would actually offer better protections against government land acquisitions for those who live in Big Sur Valley, the coast’s most populous area. “The bill takes Big Sur Valley outside the forest boundaries,” said Farr, who reminded CPOA members that he is also a Big Sur landowner.

Farr dispelled any notion that previous land deals were illegal. And he called the notion of putting a cap on future acquisitions, “a non-starter.” Farr said “people should be able to sell their land to whomever they want to.” If such a provision were added to the bill, “it would go nowhere,” he predicted.

Not only would the CPOA like to see limits imposed on the expansion of government land in Big Sur, but its members are lobbying to use some of the existing public property in the area for workforce housing.

“The limited amount of private land in the area contributes to the high cost of land and the shortage of land for the construction of workforce housing. Many who work in Big Sur travel from the Salinas Valley, Marina or other [distant] areas,” the letter explains.

Farr agreed there needs to be more workforce housing in Big Sur. “There’s not a bigger advocate for workforce housing in Big Sur than myself,” he said.

But Farr suggested the best location for housing would be the former Navy facility at Pt. Sur, which is located not on federal land, but

on property owned by the state.

A burning debate

The CPOA would also like to see language in the bill that authorizes the use of heavy equipment within wilderness boundaries in the event of a wildfire.

“It appears that Forest Service officials [are] concerned about being criticized, or sued, for authorizing the use of heavy equipment in the wilderness without sufficient justification,” the CPOA suggests.

According to the CPOA, delays during the 2008 Basin Complex Fire “threatened lives and homes.”

“Due to delays obtaining permission to use heavy equipment, the fire crossed over the historic firebreak and into the lower Little Sur River watershed, threatening to burn out the Palo Colorado, Bixby, Rocky Creek and Garrapata communities,” the letter continues.

Farr, though, was quick to disagree with such an assessment. “Their argument is not shared by anybody in the fire protection business,” he said.

The CPOA also supports launching fuel reduction projects on wilderness lands that were not part of the original boundaries of the Ventana Wilderness that were set in 1969.

“When the Ventana Wilderness was created, its boundaries were intentionally set to avoid interfering with the use of motorized equipment to maintain and use fuel breaks around most of the Monterey Ranger District of the Los Padres National Forest,” the letter adds.

From previous page

Other concerns raised by the CPOA in the letter to congressman Farr include: restricting uses of the federally owned Brazil Ranch so it doesn’t compete with local businesses; defining what the term “Wildland Urban Interface Special Study Area” means; and providing the public with a detailed map of any changes to wilderness boundaries.

Farr deflected criticism of the bill by the CPOA, saying the legislation offers Monterey County residents “more local control” of their wildlands. “We’ve always been part of somebody else’s forest.”

The congressman said he will continue to push the bill, but only if the local community supports it.

“I will try and resolve these conflicts,” Farr added. “But first of all, we need to get consensus at home.”

See **FARR** next page