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## press coverage of Rep. Huffman Trinity appearance

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# Debate over wilderness bill

Huffman promotes act to mixed reviews

- By Sally Morris The Trinity Journal



Rep. Jared Huffman (foreground) discusses his Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act during a special meeting of the Board of Supervisors Monday afternoon, July 22.

- Amy Gittelsohn | The Trinity Journal



Residents packed the Board of Supervisors chambers for the special meeting on Rep. Huffman's Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation and Working Forests Act.

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Congressman Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, literally sat down with the Trinity County Board of Supervisors on Monday in Weaverville to address all questions and concerns from board members and a packed audience there to hear about his proposed Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation and Working Forests Act, H.R. 2250 introduced in April.

The special board meeting was announced the Friday before, and one member, Sup. Jeremy Brown was unable to attend due to a pre-scheduled trip, leaving his seat open on the dais for Huffman to occupy as he fielded questions from a diverse crowd of both supporters and opponents of his proposed legislation.

Huffman's whirlwind trip to Weaverville came on the heels of a trip earlier this month by Trinity Sups. Keith Groves and Jeremy Brown to Washington, D.C., to attend the first House Natural Resources Committee hearing on H.R. 2250. They also met privately with the Congressman for an hour after the hearing.

The Board of Supervisors initially voted 3-2 last year to withhold support of a previous version of the bill without further public input from county residents. Earlier this month, the board voted to take a neutral stance on the reintroduced bill pending further input and a presentation by the congressman who had offered to make the trip. Monday's agenda was for that presentation and no action item was scheduled.

Huffman said work began on the proposed bill soon after he was elected as the District 2 House Representative seven years ago, and he wanted more than just to protect the region's special wild places, but to also address economic development, forest resiliency and fire treatment "by looking creatively at how we manage our public lands."

One of the main aspects of H.R. 2250 is the designation of a 733,000-acre South Fork Trinity-Mad River Restoration Area in Trinity County where the management focus would be on fuels treatment and plantation thinning where previous logging sites have not been maintained and now present great risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Stewardship contracting is proposed to help streamline the process and ensure projects get going. Huffman said the U.S. Forest Service "has been perpetually behind the game fighting wildfires. There hasn't been the funding and they've had to go digging through their other budgets, so the resources for other projects lag and don't happen."

He said Congress has been successful at fixing the “wildfire borrowing problem,” and that come Oct. 1, for the first time, the Forest Service will have a budget for fire suppression without dipping into other budgets.

Huffman spoke on many other aspects of the proposed legislation intended to benefit the Trinity County economy including development of a visitors’ center in Weaverville, a trail around Trinity Lake, broader trail studies, and development of a regional trail system from Mendocino County north through Trinity and into Humboldt at Crescent City. It also provides agency authority to engage in partnerships designed to generate resources to remediate illegal, trespass marijuana cultivation sites on federal lands.

Regarding proposed wilderness expansion involving 259,215 acres of national forest land, he said the areas proposed are roadless already, and except for 11,223 acres, are not eligible for logging under current rules and never have been logged.

Responding to numerous concerns expressed Monday and during previous discussions, Huffman reiterated several times that the bill would not create any new public lands or eliminate any existing private property rights. No legal roads would be eliminated.

“Any private interests are grandfathered in, and there are some. All access and other property rights remain intact and will be unaffected. The bill is very specific about that. It’s also true of new wild and scenic river designations,” Huffman said, adding all existing mining claims, grazing permits and any other private property interests on federal land will continue.

“How do we fight fire without roads? Removal of access is detrimental to our resources. Logging is so minimal now, but when we had it, we had minimal fires. Once you take out roads, you can’t get to them,” argued Diane Richards of Hayfork who added more grazing is also needed to help reduce fuels, not less.

“And the big question is, what is the real benefit in this for Trinity County? You’re taking away future resources. What is in it for us?” she asked, adding there have been no public meetings in Southern Trinity on the proposed legislation, “and people down there don’t even know about it. And this meeting only received weekend notice. With efficient notice, you could have filled a room with 400 people interested in addressing the issues of our forests.”

Huffman said he wished there had been more lead time, but scheduling was a challenge and “this won’t be our last meeting.” He said he’d be happy to try and get to Southern Trinity, “but we’ve had a lot of public meetings, big and small. I can’t conceive of any public lands bill that has received more public input.

Regarding benefits to Trinity County, Huffman said almost none of the lands designated for wilderness expansion are ever going to be mined or logged, but existing claims are preserved. Only a tiny fraction of the wilderness area proposed “is even eligible for logging and it hasn’t been done since 1989. It is highly unlikely in these sensitive, pristine areas. And you can fight fire in wilderness, even using big equipment.”

He added the wilderness areas proposed were exhaustively studied, not randomly selected.

“They have unique ecological values that need to be protected from human disturbance. Not everyone likes that policy, but a lot of people do and will travel long distances to see them,” he said, adding that in the restoration area, “there will be logging. Quite a bit more than without my bill. In the last 10 years, only a small portion has been harvested, so we think there will be more activity. Add in a visitors’ center and new trails, and I think it’s a very positive story for Trinity County,” he said.

Several asked about resources for forest and recreation maintenance projects, questioning the value of adding more when the Forest Service doesn’t have sufficient funding to take care of current facilities including trails in existing wilderness areas.

“With or without my bill, we need more funding for recreation. It is one reason we went with stewardship contracting: to create that funding. We also authorize partnerships between agencies and private, nonprofit groups, and we’ll have to work separately to create those resources, but I commit to that,” Huffman said.

Some suggested splitting the proposed bill into smaller parts, arguing most people are in favor of increased management activities to create healthier, more fire resilient forests and watersheds, but disagree over the proposed wilderness additions.

“I like the unconventional mixture. If I start carving up what people like and what they don’t, it’s a different bill. I want a comprehensive, broad vision. That’s what makes it unique,” Huffman said.

Several spoke in support of the bill in general and of wilderness additions specifically, arguing the tourism they bring is an important economic asset for Trinity County and they are necessary to address a “biodiversity crisis on the planet.”

Others expressed mistrust that the Forest Service will abide by the bill’s intent, saying they fear that no matter what is written into it, the federal government will use it to limit public access and use of national forest land.

Huffman said when there are instances of someone “being jerked around” by a federal agency, he has “gone to bat” for them and will always do so. Regarding his proposed legislation, he said “from the beginning, we’ve made many revisions in response to feedback and tried to address any negative impacts or perceptions. There will be no road closures. No loss of private property rights. It will all be balanced against additional forest management that will happen and the recreation. I see nothing but an economic upside compared to the status quo. But we aren’t going back to some logging hay day of the 1980s. These are unlikely areas to ever be logged.”

Sup. Keith Groves thanked the Congressman for coming to Weaverville and for a “generous” amount of time with the two county supervisors on their visit to Washington. He said his objections are not focused on the proposed wilderness expansion as much as the proposed activities within the designated restoration area.

“Why treat that differently than what we are supposed to be doing in all of the national forest? It’s looking to me like a pre-wilderness area, eliminating other activities,” Groves said, adding that as longtime county residents, “we have a hard time accepting the promises. When we’re told ‘you can keep your rights,’ that hasn’t been how it’s worked out. You’re allowing people to keep their grazing, but it’s subject to Secretary (of Agriculture) consideration, which means the Secretary has a right to change that,” Groves said.

Huffman responded that the Secretary has that right today, regardless of what’s in his proposed bill, and that the proposed restoration area “is pretty different than any other wilderness label. We’re looking for more logging, more activity there.”

Groves argued better maps are needed to show potential effects of the legislation on the ground, citing past instances when roads in public use for many years have been closed by the Forest Service without warning, saying they weren’t legal roads.

Huffman answered there is language in his bill requiring greater consultation “and more hoops to jump through” than current law requires of the Forest Service before decommissioning any road.

Groves also suggested looking for some way to reimburse the county for any loss in the 25 percent of gross national forest receipts generated by activities on federal lands, which he admitted have fallen from some \$14 million in the hay day of logging down to \$89,000 last year.

“My point is, we know we’re giving something up. Even if it’s just \$100,000, that’s a lot of money for our schools and roads,” he said, arguing the county should receive a 25 percent share of any stewardship contracting revenues.

Huffman countered that the proposed restoration area has generated almost no timber harvest in the past 10 years, so comparing the 25 percent that went to the county with all additional forest treatment to come, “I think we’ll see with this bill a net positive.” He added his colleagues in Congress are unlikely to change stewardship contracting rules just for Trinity County.

As for the bill’s legislative future, Huffman said it just had its first hearing by the natural resources committee and will next go for a mark-up hearing which hasn’t been scheduled yet, but isn’t likely until after the August recess. Then it goes to the full House of Representatives for a vote, probably near the end of the calendar year. If it survives that, it goes to the Senate for a full process there, “so it has a long way to go.”

The entire text of the bill can be viewed online at [www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2250](http://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2250).