



Access bill in U.S. Congress raises sportsmen's hopes

Staff Report

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Hunters and anglers are hailing a new bill in Congress introduced by New Mexico Rep. Martin Heinrich that would improve sportsmen's access to millions of acres of currently landlocked public lands. The HUNT Act (HR 6086) would direct federal land management agencies to inventory and provide access to landlocked public land parcels greater than 640 acres that have the potential for hunting, fishing or other outdoor recreation. In addition, the bill dedicates 1.5 percent of the Land and Water Conservation Fund to acquire easements, rights of way or land from willing sellers.

Blocked access to public lands has been a sore point with New Mexico sportsmen for years, prompting some organizations to work directly with land management agencies to improve access wherever possible. "This is a critical piece of legislation that's long overdue," said Jim Bates of Las Cruces.

Many sportsmen see the dwindling access to public lands as a reason why the number of hunters and anglers is in decline. "The HUNT Act would go a long way toward retaining and recruitment of new sportsmen, which is vital if we want to maintain our outdoor traditions," said Ray Trejo, NMWF president.

Recent studies also show that recreational use of public land is an important economic driver, helping sustain rural economies. A recent report shows that last year, public lands managed by the Interior Department supported 403,000 jobs and contributed nearly \$49 billion in economic benefits through recreation and tourism. Another report issued late last year by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation found that hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers spent a combined \$137.4 billion in 2006.

"One of the things I like best about the bill," Trejo said, "is that it will finally start to measure the problem of landlocked public land, so we know if we are making progress or losing ground. It's hard to solve a problem that you don't measure, and that has been one of our big problems in the past."

Responding to a request from sportsmen, the State Game Commission will review the legal decision that has exempted oryx, ibex and bighorn sheep from the state's resident quota law since the mid-1970s. The issue is on the agenda when the Game Commission meets Thursday,

Aug. 23, in Rio Rancho. The decision, known as *Terk v. Gordon*, has irritated hunters since 1977 because other states apply their resident quotas to all species. (Because of the *Terk* decision, New Mexico residents drew just one of 16 available desert bighorn sheep tags in this year's Big Game Draw.) In June, NMWF Director Jeremy Vesbach asked the commission to pursue whatever legal challenge might be necessary to bring the three species under the Big Game Draw; this month's discussion could be a first step toward achieving that goal.