

Sunday, March 29, 2009 2:06 AM MDT

Star-Tribune Editorial Board

Anyone who has been to the Wyoming Range knows what a special place it is. Thanks to a grassroots effort by Wyoming residents, an act of Congress has made sure it will continue to be enjoyed by future generations.

The Wyoming Range Legacy Act will limit future oil and gas drilling on a 100-mile stretch of the range. It was one of more than 160 bills in the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act, along with a Wyoming measure to protect nearly 400 miles of Snake River headwaters as "wild and scenic."

It took a unique coalition of outfitters, environmental groups and sportsmen to suggest the Wyoming Range bill and fight for its passage. The groups managed to get U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas on board early, and he was drafting the legislation when he died of leukemia in 2007.

His successor, Sen. John Barrasso, picked up where he left off and also sponsored the Snake River bill, which he named in Thomas' memory. Despite the opposition of the oil and gas industry, supporters of the Wyoming Range measure were convincing in their argument that there will be no effect on existing oil and gas leases.

Barrasso had the support of Wyoming U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi, but he could never win the approval of freshman Rep. Cynthia Lummis, who ignored the wishes of many of her constituents and voted against the omnibus bill. Fortunately, the bill was passed by the U.S. House and is scheduled to be signed by President Barack Obama tomorrow.

In addition to the Wyoming bills, the omnibus package will designate nearly 2 million acres in nine states as wilderness areas.

Passage of the Wyoming bills represents a significant preservation achievement. But it's not the first time that people have come together for the sake of protecting unique parts of Wyoming.

In 1984, Wyoming's congressional delegation -- Sens. Alan Simpson and Malcolm Wallop and then-Rep. Dick Cheney -- managed to win approval of the popular Wyoming Wilderness Act, providing protection for nearly one million acres of Wyoming's wilderness lands. Cheney, the former vice president, spearheaded the effort and called it one of his "proudest achievements."

In the early 1990s, with Thomas replacing Cheney, the delegation helped designate a section of the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River as "wild and scenic." The designation protects water quality and the free-flowing nature of a river while allowing activities such as fishing, hunting, camping, boating, snowmobile riding, ATV use and livestock grazing. Those interests got behind the effort.

And in 2005, Gov. Dave Freudenthal and the Wyoming Legislature worked together to create the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resources Trust, a fund to preserve and enhance Wyoming's world-class wildlife and habitat. That effort was also backed by sportsmen and conservation groups.

"A commitment to stewardship and protecting special places has been written across the pages of Wyoming's history, but that story is hardly over," said Jared White of the Wilderness Society. "The state can have both growth and preservation, but the proposals which are championed by all of Wyoming's political leaders will continue to come from Wyoming citizens."

Wyoming people are able to bridge political differences to find common ground and build alliances around places like the Wyoming Range that are important to all of us. All of the people who came together to pass this legislation deserve the state's thanks.