

Methow Valley News

Online

[Close Window](#)

Methow dropped from park proposal

By [Marcy Stamper](#)

After a mixed response from people in the Methow and widespread enthusiasm from West-side communities, a proposal to expand North Cascades National Park has been modified to exclude the Methow Valley.

The new proposal by the [American Alps Legacy Project](#) would stop the eastern boundary of a larger park at Washington Pass rather than extending it all the way to Early Winters, according to Jim Davis, director of the Legacy Project. The revised plan eliminates 160,000 acres from the expansion area, but would still add 238,000 acres to the existing park, which is about 600,000 acres.

Besides removing the Methow from the proposal, the Legacy Project has added land in Whatcom County, based on positive feedback from businesses and environmental and recreational groups in Marblemount, Rockport and Bellingham, said Davis.

Much of the land eyed for annexation was included in the original study area for the park, said Davis, who is also director of the North Cascades Conservation Council, which worked on the original park proposal in the 1960s.

The proposal released two-and-a-half years ago sparked concern over commercial and private development in Mazama as part of a new gateway community, said Davis. While many business owners and environmentalists in the Methow favored the proposal, others were concerned about restrictions that would come with National Park status, such as not being able to bring dogs on trails, he said.

The primary aims of an expanded park are to increase access to recreation, particularly family-oriented, level trails at lower elevations and habitat conservation, said Davis. "We are looking to improve conservation and wildlife habitat, particularly lower-elevation wildlife habitat, which is missing from the existing park," said Davis. The backcountry would be left pristine and wild, said Davis.

"It's dumbing down the front-country," said Paul Butler, co-owner of [North Cascade Heli](#), who has opposed the expansion of the park, about the notion that more access is needed from the highway. He pointed to existing short, accessible trails to waterfalls and other scenic areas that get little use.

Butler said different types of users like the blend of wilderness, U.S. Forest Service and National Park lands, where they can pursue activities such as mountain biking and horseback riding.

While land east of the crest would not be annexed to the park, the proposal does call for new visitors' centers in Winthrop and Marblemount (and closing the under-utilized one in Newhalem), according to Davis. "There is a synergy when a visitors' center is in a community, as opposed to the park," said Davis. People stop at the visitors' center and then buy ice cream or go to a restaurant, or visit the center because they are touring the town, he said.

Congress would have to approve any expansion or changes to the National Park. The next step is for a senator or representative to sponsor the proposal. "They're definitely looking at it," said Davis.

Butler said the Legacy Project had not convinced people of the need for the expansion, noting that the Achilles' heel would be increased traffic congestion. The irony is that they want to increase visitation while at the same time enhancing habitat protection, he said. "It's a double-edged sword."

Photo courtesy of American Alps Legacy



Sept. 28, 2011