



Group drops Methow Valley from new National Park proposal

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09/23/2011 World photo K.C. Mehaffey

A motorcyclist drives west on the North Cascades Highway Friday between Washington Pass and Rainy Pass — just part of nearly 238,000 acres that the American Alps Legacy Project proposes to add to the North Cascades National Park.

MAZAMA — A plan to add about 109,000 acres of the Methow Valley Ranger District to the North Cascades National Park has been dropped, due to opposition from mountain bikers, hunters, dog-owning hikers and others.

The American Alps Legacy Project on Friday released its final proposal, which would now add nearly 238,000 acres to the park, instead of the 350,000 acres once envisioned.

Established in 1968, the 684,000-acre park would increase by more than one-third its current size, and could bring more than 1,000 new jobs to rural communities surrounding the park, an economic study of the proposal found. The park is currently one of the least-visited in the lower 48 states.

Proposed additions to the North Cascades National Park

- Liberty Bell, 9,355 acres: From Washington Pass to Rainy Pass along both sides of the North Cascades Highway, currently part of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.
- Skagit headwaters, 84,953 acres: From Rainy Pass to Ross Lake along both sides of the North Cascades Highway, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest managed by the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.
- Skagit Valley, 94,644 acres: Land surrounding Ross Lake and along both sides of the North Cascades Highway from the eastern boundary of Ross Lake to Newhalem, currently part of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area.
- Cascade River, 21,042 acres: Low elevations along the Cascade River with old-growth forests southeast of Marblemount, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.
- Bacon Creek, 10,709 acres: a high-priority salmon restoration stream north of Marblemount, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.
- Baker Rainforest, 13,209 acres: Low-elevation habitat along the Baker River near Concrete, considered very important in winter for several species, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

— Nooksack headwaters, 3,790 acres: Mt Shuksan views and important habitat for elk east of Glacier, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Source: North Cascades Conservation Council

In the final proposal, a large area between Washington Pass and Mazama was taken out, while land in western Washington was added.

“There were other ongoing activities or interests that we felt were very legitimate, and maybe the national park wasn’t right for this area at this time,” said Jim Davis, executive director of the North Cascades Conservation Council, a founding group of American Alps Legacy.

The Legacy group includes several influential advisory members such as conservationist Polly Dyer, former governor and senator Dan Evans, and president of the Endangered Species Coalition Brock Evans, and is supported by numerous bipartisan conservation groups, including the Mountaineers Club, the Seattle Audubon Society, Republicans for Environmental Protection and the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs.

The now-excluded national forest land west of Mazama includes some well-known mountain biking trails, popular bear hunting areas, and high mountain slopes used for helicopter-assisted skiing. Dog lovers also worried they would be excluded from bringing their pooches on hiking trails there. None of those activities are allowed in a national park, although they could have been grandfathered in, Davis said.

“We’ve tried to achieve a balance of conservation, recreation and economic benefit, and at the same time, recognize pre-existing uses, and try to be sensitive to those,” he said.

The initial proposal drew excitement and political support from communities in western Washington hoping to cash in on nearby access to the North Cascades National Park, Davis said. People from Marblemount to Concrete and from Glacier and Bellingham clamored to be among the park-front communities that could benefit economically, he said.

But east of the Cascades, some conservationists worried the tiny unincorporated town of Mazama would be overdeveloped if it bordered the national park, now 22 miles west of Mazama as the crow flies, and with many additional miles necessary for actual access to the park.



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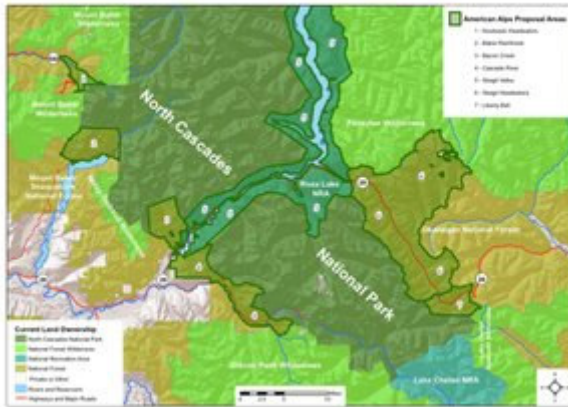
Visitors at the Washington Pass Scenic Overlook on the North Cascades Highway look out at Kangaroo Ridge, an area that was once part of a proposal to be added to the North Cascades National Park, but was taken out due to opposition from mountain bikers, hunters and people who like to hike with dogs — all activities that are not allowed in a national park.

“A point of view we strongly sympathize with is that there might be a gateway overdevelopment, with new clustering of businesses and condos and hotels right around Mazama,” Davis said.

He said one reason for the concern is that Mazama could replace Winthrop as the Methow Valley’s current destination for tourists.

The proposal still includes a National Park Service visitor center in Winthrop, and an interpretive center at Washington Pass, where the Methow Valley Ranger District recently improved its scenic overlook.

It also still encompasses nearly 85,000 acres that are managed by the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, but are technically part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. And, it includes 9,355 acres in Chelan County, between Washington Pass and Rainy Pass west of Liberty Bell Mountain.



09/26/2011 Map provided by North Cascades Conservation Council

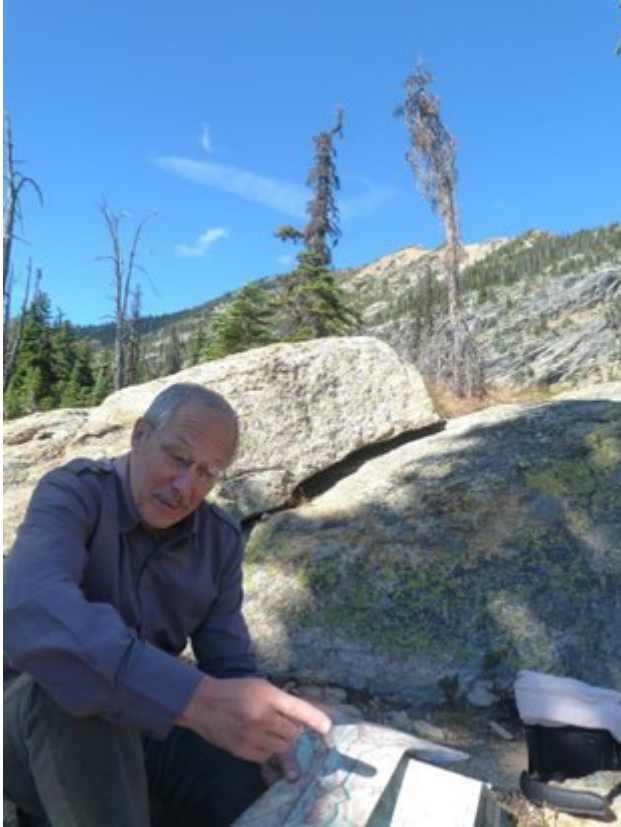
This map shows the final proposal by the North Cascades Conservation Council to add about 238,000 acres to the North Cascades National Park. The newest plan takes out about 109,000 acres in Okanogan County along Highway 20 from the Washington Pass Scenic Lookout to Mazama, which is currently part of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Davis said their proposal is designed to offer long-term protection of areas added to the park, while adding things for visitors to do.

He said the National Park Service would better protect the area because it does not have the multi-use mandate of national forests, which must manage for uses ranging from logging and mining to recreation.

If the national park is expanded, the American Alps Legacy envisions adding about 20 miles of new family-friendly trails, waterfall tours, ecotourism sites and cultural interpretive areas.

Expanding the park will require an act of Congress, so they've been working closely with aides to Sen. Maria Cantwell, and hope she will not only support the new plan but introduce the legislation to make it happen.



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Jim Davis, executive director of the North Cascades Conservation Council, shows on a map the lands taken out, and still included, in his group's proposal to add nearly 238,000 acres to the North Cascades National Park, much of it along the North Cascades Highway. If successful, proponents hope to add several amenities along the highway, including a trail from the Washington Pass Overlook to the ridge seen behind Davis.

Despite excluding the area from Mazama to Washington Pass, Davis said N3C still believes that land needs further protection.

He said under the national forest's multi-use designation, the high price of gold could bring new mining operations, or energy concerns could initiate small hydropower projects or timber cutting for biomass energy.

"We feel pretty strongly that there are still threats of economic and recreational development there," he said. "We pulled back to Washington Pass, but we really hope the people in the Methow Valley will look at the future of that area in light of these issues."

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