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Craters expansion plan gets a hearing

By N.S. Nokkentved
Times-News writer

ARCO - Sen. Larry Craig and the rest of Idaho congressional delegation want more people to have a voice in a proposal to expand the Craters of the Moon National Monument.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and the Clinton administration have drawn heavy criticism from Idaho politicians, who say the administration has left the public out of discussions of the proposal. As a result, Craig has arranged a hearing for Saturday, starting with testimony from invited, selected panelists, and followed by public comment.

Craig called the hearing in Twin Falls to allow for broader public input, spokesman Mike Tracy said. So far only selected people have been invited to meet with Babbitt.

To comment ...

WHAT: Public hearing on the proposed expansion of Craters of the Moon National Monument.

WHEN: 9:30 a.m. Saturday.

WHERE: College of Southern Idaho Fine Arts Auditorium.

Public comment will be taken after panelists' testimony and question-and-answer periods. Call Sen. Larry Craig's Twin Falls office to sign up for the comment period at 734-6780.

More than rocks

Craters of the Moon Monument and the area surrounding it has world-class geology. For more, please see page A5.

Field representatives have attended meetings with Babbitt in Idaho, but congressional offices have been left out of the process.

"That's not good policy-making," Tracy said.

Others have felt left out, too. Motorized recreation groups have complained, while environmentalists say they could have made the expansion proposal better.

The focus on the Great Rift has been on geological features, but the area also has some biological features worth saving, said Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League. Despite being left out of the discussion, Johnson said he supports the expanded monument.

"Idahoans want this to happen," Johnson said. "It's a good thing; it'll be good for the ranchers."

The history

Babbitt has revived a 10-year-old local proposal to expand Craters to

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include the Great Rift, for consideration by President Clinton, who could designate a national monument under the 1906 Antiquities Act.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne said last month that Babbitt had assured him that he would make no recommendation on the proposal until people in Idaho have a chance to comment.

In a May 17 letter to Babbitt, the delegation wrote, "We are very disturbed by your effort to accomplish this land lockup without providing proper public process, and once again bypassing Congress."

Babbitt noted during a recent visit to Idaho that Congress in 1906 gave the president the authority to create national monuments to preserve "objects of scientific and historic interest" under the Antiquities Act.

The Act gave then-President Teddy Roosevelt the authority to protect the land that eventually became Grand Canyon National Park. Fourteen of Roosevelt's 17 successors have used the act to make 100 designations around the country.

President Calvin Coolidge designated the Craters of the Moon National Monument in May 1924 with the support of then-Sen. William E. Borah.

Clinton already has designated more than a million acres in Arizona and California in national monuments this year after using the act four years ago to preserve 1.9 million acres in southern Utah as the Grand Staircase-Escalante federal monument.

The addition of two more monuments was announced Friday - the 200,000-acre Hanford Reach National Monument along the Columbia River in southeast Washington and 52,000-acre Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Oregon on the California border.

Two additional monuments

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have been proposed in Colorado and Arizona.

The proposal

The idea of expanding the national monument at Craters of the Moon to include the 62-mile string of volcanic features of the Great Rift is not new, and it is not Babbitt's own. The idea came from a group of local people, said former U.S. Rep. Richard Stallings of Pocatello.

In the 1980s, when the agricultural industry was in trouble, a group of people from Burley, Arco and Carey had come to him with a proposal to expand Craters of the Moon or make it a national park to help diversify the local economies, Stallings said. In 1989, he introduced legislation to expand the boundaries of the existing monument to include the lava flows of the Great Rift.

He subsequently was voted out of office and his successors

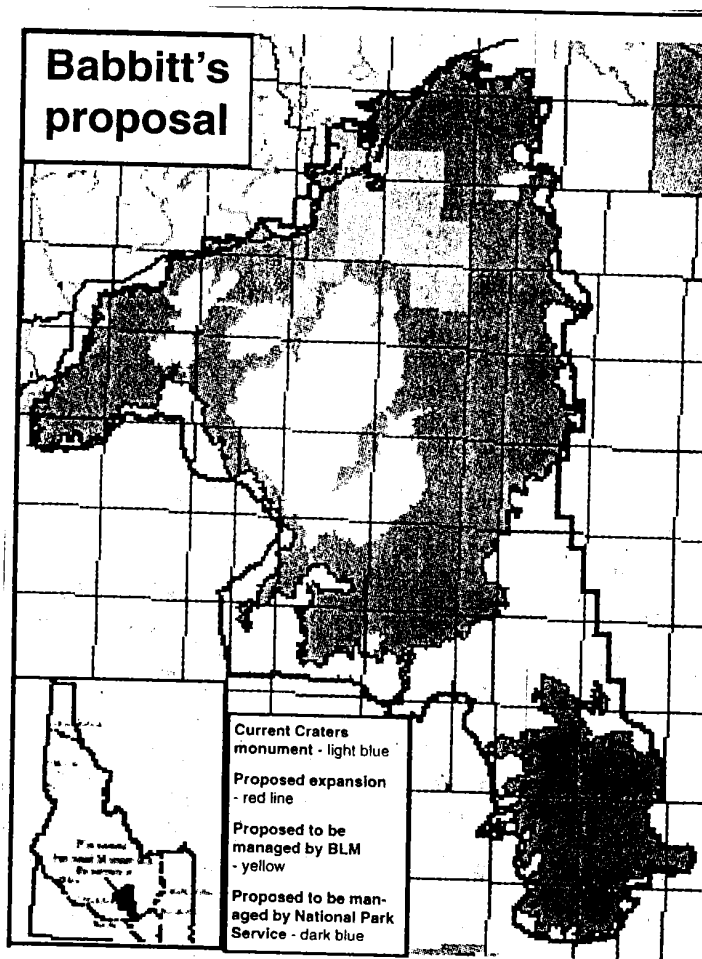
showed little interest in the proposal, he said.

At the urging of former Govs. John Evans and Cecil Andrus, Babbitt rekindled Stallings' proposal.

Babbitt has not convened any widely advertised public hearings. He has met several times with local officials and ranchers, who helped draw the boundaries and resolve issues of grazing permits, predator control and hunting within the boundaries of an expanded monument.

He has not yet made any recommendation to the president about expanding Craters of the Moon. The secretary still is talking to local people affected by the proposal, spokesman John Wright said.

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Map courtesy the Bureau of Land Management

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Spokesman Review
Spokane, WA

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Wilderness wanted

■ U.S. Bureau of Land management

About 88 million acres of Western roadless lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management have been improperly inventoried and poorly managed, according to a recently filed lawsuit.

More than 100 national and grass-roots environmental groups have joined to petition Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to follow the lead of the Forest Service roadless area initiative and protect from development 60 million acres of what they believe to be wilderness-quality BLM lands.

Nearly 12 million of those acres are in southern Idaho and eastern Oregon.

The Forest Service has already launched a formal process to preserve 43 million acres of its roadless lands by the end of this year. However, with only eight months remaining in office, interior officials said Babbitt was focused on other priorities.

"We would barely begin the undertaking before this administration leaves office," said Michael Gaudin, department communications director.

Rich Landers

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