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On December 12, the Senate passed a group of public lands bills as part of the 2015 defense authorization (H.R.3979, Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015). The bill includes expansions of wilderness and park lands as well as changes to energy, mining, and logging policy on public lands. While there was a last minute attempt by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) to remove these measures from the defense authorization, the bill passed by a final vote of 89-11, with both Democrats and Republicans voting in opposition.

Many senators lauded the package as a compromise between environmental and development interests. However, conservationist critics objected to a measure that would allow copper mining on lands in Arizona that the Apache consider sacred, as well as others promoting logging in Alaska and stock grazing on public lands. Proponents of the Arizona mine argue that it will create jobs and economic growth in the region. Though he voted for the bill, Sen. Coburn also expressed concerns over the cost of new National Park units and additions to federally protected lands.

The bill passed the House on December 2, and it now awaits the President’s signature.

Sources: E&E News, Congress.gov
