Today, the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (S. 22), an important land preservation and management bill, was defeated in the U.S. House of Representatives, despite bipartisan support. The bill would have protected over 2 million acres of wilderness in nine states, enlarged the boundaries of several national parks, and authorized land swaps that would have helped to protect western water supplies and other resources, among other features.

S. 22 actually combined well over one hundred smaller bills in a package that was presented without opportunity for amendment, under a procedure that would have required a two-thirds vote for passage. Although there was much support, it fell two votes short of that margin. (The bill had already passed the Senate in January.) Oddly, S. 22 may have failed in large part because of a political battle over whether loaded guns may be carried on certain federal lands.

Although the bill had many other features, the wilderness designation provisions are especially noteworthy. The Wilderness Act, passed in 1964, created the opportunity for Congress to designate federal land to be managed to preserve "natural conditions" without permanent human habitation or improvements. The vast majority of federal land units, managed by the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service, are managed for multiple uses including both motorized and less intensive recreation, resource extraction such as timber harvest and grazing, and ecosystem management. National Park System lands are more restricted in their uses. But designation of an area as wilderness – a designation that can apply to lands that would otherwise be managed for multiple uses – is generally much more restricted still. Wilderness designation places land off-limits, with limited exceptions, to motorized access (including developed campgrounds, vehicular recreation, and roads in general), and most resource extraction.

S. 22 would have designated several new wilderness areas in California and in other Western states. (See here for descriptions of some of the proposed wilderness areas contained in the bill.) Wilderness designation for these lands is a critically important tool for preserving intact some of the last areas in our country that are not yet developed with roads and buildings.

Because wilderness designation is generally incompatible with resource extraction, proponents of expanding oil and gas leasing on federal lands are among those displeased with the bill. Off-road vehicle enthusiasts also oppose the bill because wilderness designation is fundamentally incompatible with their recreational interests. (Both these interest groups also are inclined to oppose enlarging

National Parks lands, another feature of the bill, for similar reasons.)

But in the end, it appears that politics of firearms did the bill in. For decades, the National Park Service had a policy that forbade possessing a loaded gun on Park Service lands. A "midnight regulation" enacted by the Bush administration in its last days changed this rule. The new rule is under review by the Obama administration, but gun-rights supporters hope Congress will allow guns in national parks as a matter of law rather than leave the question to be resolved by the executive branch. And this dispute seems to have caused S. 22's failure. According to an AP report:

> Supporters said the bill was brought up under a special rule – which severely restricts amendments – because majority Democrats were afraid that Republicans would introduce an amendment allowing guns in parks. With dozens of Democrats supporting gun rights, such a measure stood a good chance of passage, advocates and staff aides in both parties said.
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> A similar maneuver by Republicans – to repeal most of the District of Columbia's gun-control laws – has jeopardized legislation giving the district a vote in the House of Representatives. The measure remains stalled as House leaders ponder their next move. Advocates said the wilderness bill also may languish.

So it seems the Democrats lost this procedural battle, and with it the bill's chance of passage, even with significant bipartisan support for the substance. It's unclear what happens next, but I'm hoping it will be resolved soon in a way that manages to protect these important lands that the vast majority of Congresspeople have expressed a willingness to protect.