

Gunning for parks

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Planning a nice family vacation this summer to one of the country's 390 gorgeous national parks? Great. But be warned: You may soon have to worry about park visitors legally packing loaded guns at the ready.

Nearly half the U.S. Senate - eight Democrats and 39 Republicans, including GOP presidential nominee-in-waiting John McCain - signed on to a December letter urging Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to eliminate the decades-old requirement that rifles, shotguns or other firearms carried into or through national parks or wildlife refuges be unloaded and stored in a way that prevents their "ready use."

That letter, initiated by the National Rifle Association and organized by Republican Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho and Democratic Sen. Max Baucus of Montana, has not yet been acted upon.

But the supporters have a second arrow in their quiver. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., plans to offer an amendment to an otherwise noncontroversial bill authorizing various programs for national parks and other public lands. Coburn's amendment would prevent the government from enforcing the current gun regulations, requiring national parks and refuges to instead observe state gun laws. A spokesman said the senator hopes to bring the amendment to a vote this week.

This is absurd.

It is easy to see the problems that officials were trying to fix when Interior Secretary James Watt - no anti-gun liberal, he - enacted the firearms restrictions in the first Reagan administration. Wildlife were being poached in what were supposed to be animal sanctuaries, and people were being endangered.

But what problems are the NRA, Crapo, Baucus, Coburn, et al., trying to fix?

Crapo said in his letter to Kempthorne that there is inconsistency in firearms regulations between different federal agencies. So he's going to fix that by having national parks and wildlife refuges follow the hodgepodge of differing state gun laws?

We wondered, at first, how Crapo and Baucus managed to get 45 other senators to sign the letter. Just maybe it was a little deception. The letter describes the current regulations as "prohibitions on law-abiding citizens from transporting and carrying firearms" on park and wildlife service lands.

False.

According to the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, the current regulations specifically say that firearms "may be possessed" in national parks and refuges as long as the weapons are unloaded or packed, cased or stored away - in a car's trunk, for example.

Denny Huffman, a leader of that organization, has it right when he says, "It is a hoax to suggest that there is some big demand out there for people to be able to tote semi-automatic weapons on the trails of Yellowstone or nine-millimeter pistols on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial." Responsible sportsmen and gun owners, he added, "know that the current rule on guns is no infringement on their Second Amendment rights."

We urge Kempthorne to stand fast. And we urge California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer to do what they can to shoot down this ridiculous amendment.

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