

Nevada-centric bills languishing in Congress

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

With only a few weeks left in the congressional session, it's do-or-die time for two years' worth of bills Nevada lawmakers have filed to fix local problems that need federal attention.

There are pending bills to free up federal lands for mining and declare other sections of the state as wilderness. There are bills-in-waiting to mitigate unemployment and homelessness for veterans. There is lingering legislation to help with mortgage modification. And that's not even counting online poker – which technically doesn't count because a bill hasn't been officially filed.

To pass all these measures is an impossible task: They are competing with thousands of other pieces of legislation – not to mention a little thing called the fiscal cliff – for attention before the holidays.

That means the Nevada delegation must pick their favorites, then plead their case with those who have the power to push them through in the last few weeks.

“To just say, ‘Hey I introduced your bill, have a nice day,’ well that is a nice piece of paper, but you should be moving this through and getting it done,” said Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev. “So I'm putting all my cards on the table and going as hard as I can.”

Luckily, the chief operator at the helm of the process is also a Nevadan: Sen. Harry Reid.

This week, Reps. Joe Heck and Shelley Berkley had private meetings with the senior senator, in which they urged him to

do everything in his power to move local Nevada bills – especially the many public-lands bills that have been collecting dust on the Senate calendar for many months.

“Sen. Reid’s always been upfront with me,” said Heck, who has four bills he’s prioritized as must-do: Two on veterans affairs and two on public lands, to authorize the Three Kids Mine cleanup and the Mesquite land conveyance. “There are several issues, none of which I think are insurmountable.”

Nevada representatives report the obstacles they have encountered to their bills are usually the result of some philosophical hangup or an unfamiliarity with Nevada’s unique relationship with the federal government – especially when it comes to public lands.

“Any time you give federal land back to a state, that is considered an earmark, even if they’re paying a fair market value for it,” Heck said.

When it comes to public-lands issues, there is remarkably little disagreement within the Nevada delegation, which has become expert at making successful tradeoffs of exploitable and conservation lands.

The pending bills include one to sell 10,400 acres of BLM land to the city of Yerington to develop a copper mine, a bill to hand over about 1,000 acres of BLM land to aid in the cleanup of the Three Kids Mine in Henderson, and bills to designate the Pine Forest Range, north of Winnemucca, a wilderness area.

This year, if all the Nevada public-lands bills were to pass, the trade would be 15,000 acres for mining and 75,000 acres for wilderness, according to Amodei, who as representative of the rural districts has filed the lion’s share of public-lands bills.

But federal-lands matters aren’t just up to the Nevada delegation.

This year, the fate of Nevada's lands bills is tied up with that of lands bills in general. Three Kids Mine, Mesquite, and the more highly publicized Yerington Land Conveyance and Pine Forest bills have all, for the moment, been rolled into one large public-lands package that incorporates projects in Nevada and other states.

Republican Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, who has a habit of placing holds on public-lands bills, has objected to it.

"I just don't believe we should be giving the federal government any more land," Coburn told the Sun this week.

Reid ultimately controls the calendar of what gets taken up in the Senate. But the Senate's practice of holds – where a single senator can block progress on a piece of legislation – means that authority can be quickly undermined.

"Even though (Reid's) the majority leader, there's only so much he can do in the Senate. And so if there are issues on my side of the aisle, it's hard for him to impact those," Heck said. "So that's where I got engaged more heavily."

Nevada's lawmakers are skeptical that Coburn's objections have more to do with his made-in-Oklahoma opinions about federal land – less than 4 percent of Oklahoma is owned by the federal government compared with about 85 percent in Nevada – than it does with the particulars of the Silver State projects proposed.

"The vast majority of these bills, they're paying for themselves. So if you've got issues with them, tell us what they are," Amodei said. "I was thinking of calling (former Sen. John) Ensign up and saying, hey, what's up with Coburn? They did live together. ... I haven't decided if I'm going to do that. Probably not."

Amodei is kicking himself about not directly approaching Reid earlier to hash out a way to shuttle at least some Nevada

lands bills – primarily Yerington and Pine Forest – through before Coburn got in the way.

“I do recall that he’s the majority leader and that they do have things on the radar screen that might be a little higher than this,” Amodei said. “But I’m not going back to Winnemucca and saying, ‘Hey guess what? ... Congratulations, you’ve done everything right, but you’ve got nothing to show for it.’”

Coburn isn’t the only hold-up to the Nevada delegation’s final-week ambitions. Heck said he also has been having trouble getting two veterans bills that passed the House up in the Senate. He is running up against senators with similar legislation that don’t seem too keen on working with him to close the loop.

One is Heck’s Stolen Valor bill; Sen. Jim Webb has similar legislation in the Senate.

“His version unfortunately won’t meet constitutional muster,” Heck said. “We’re trying to work with his office to say, ‘Why don’t you just take ours?’ I’ve had a hard time tracking him down. I might have to go stake out his office.”

A spokeswoman for Webb said she was aware of Heck’s bill but did not respond to a request for comment Friday afternoon.

Heck also has a bill to mitigate veteran homelessness. A spokeswoman for Reid said Friday that he expected the Senate would vote on legislation written by Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed.

For those who have been in Congress for a while, this sort of last minute pileup is par for the course.

But the newer members of the delegation – especially those in the House – find the slow pace of getting local bills through Congress baffling.

“I’m surprised,” Heck said of his veterans bill. “I don’t

think I was naive, but when a bill passes out 410 to 3, you'd think that it was a slam dunk."

Amodei said: "The Yerington bill ... it was here before me. ... Seriously? It shouldn't take years and years and years. Does it cure the ills of cancer? No, but hey, this is a big step, this is a good thing to do regionally and you don't have to take a bath as the federal government to do it."

Over the next few weeks they will watch, and wait, until the final hours of the 112th Senate, when Reid will rattle off the bill numbers of the measures he's managed to reach unanimous consent on in the Senate.

And they will hope that Reid exercises a little home-state advantage.

"These bills are priorities for Sen. Reid," said his spokeswoman, Kristen Orthman. "He will work hard with the Nevada delegation to get them done."