

Remote Nev. trail has rugged political path

By Benjamin Spillman, AP

RENO — Hot, dry and dusty.

That's how someone who buzzed across Nevada on Interstate 80 or Highway 50 might describe the scenery.

But crossing the state on foot via the American Discovery Trail is a completely different experience.

The national, coast-to-coast trail stretches 496 miles through Nevada from Baker to Incline Village, goes over 10,000 and 12,000 foot mountain summits, through thick stands of aspen, crosses paths of elk herds and mountain lions and along the shore of Lake Tahoe.

"It's paradise, man," said Brian Stark, who in 2011 ran the Nevada section of the trail in 11 days, seven hours and 28 minutes. "It was a world of difference between running the highway and running actual trail across the state of Nevada."

Stark, 42, has run across 31 states and made the trip in part to highlight the significance of the American Discovery Trail, which goes between Cape Henlopen State Park in Delaware and Point Reyes National Seashore in California.

Although sections of the trail have been in existence before the United States was a country, the American Discovery Trail hasn't yet been recognized by Congress. Recognition, according to Stark and others, would make it possible to post trail markers for runners, cyclists and equestrians and help elevate the visibility of the route.

For Nevada, it would mean exposing some of the nation's best backcountry to a wider audience of potential visitors, extreme

athletes and adventurers.

"When I got to those woods and bearing down on Lake Tahoe, the alpine forest, the pine needles, the blue lakes ... it was just a really, really great thing to see," Stark told the Reno Gazette-Journal, describing the experience. "The thought of Nevada from people who don't live there is flat and brown but that is not the case."

While the trail is an opportunity to see parts of Nevada, and the country, most people never see, the politics of getting the designation from Congress is all too familiar.

From about 1998, Congress has seen several proposals to designate the American Discovery Trail, but the job remains undone.

Backers say they have a difficult time identifying specific problems they could address because it's not getting derailed out in the open. It's merely languishing without action while supporters try to assuage vague concerns about the trail representing an increase in federal control of the land.

Peter Schoettle of the American Discovery Trail Society said westerners in particular have a tendency to view any sort of federal designation as an expansion of the federal government.

"Everybody east of the Mississippi laughs at that and thinks it is loony," Schoettle said. "I think there is a real split in the country."

Backers merely want Congress to add the American Discovery Trail to the National Trails System, which was created in 1968 as a system of scenic, historic and recreational trails. There are now eight National Scenic Trails, 15 National Historic Trails and more than 1,000 National Recreational Trails.

The American Discovery would be unique because of its length and fact it goes east-to-west, unlike the Pacific Crest,

Appalachian and Continental Divide trails, which go north and south. It would also be a new category of trail that would link urban and rural communities in addition to backcountry.

The bill doesn't call for any spending, nor would it include restrictions on building, energy development, mining or grazing.

"This is not a wilderness trail. We are not trying to protect any wilderness areas," Schoettle said. "If somebody wants to build something right next to the trail that's fine."

The most recent effort is a Senate bill introduced in May by Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., and Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. There's also a companion bill in the House.

Ted Oxborrow of Carson City, who, along with his son, Trevor, supported Stark's run, has been trying to gain support from Nevada's representatives. He said it's been difficult even getting staff members to take the time to listen to the proposal, even though Nevada's backcountry is a highlight of the entire trail.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., whose district includes part of the trail, wouldn't take a stance for or against the idea.

"Rep. Amodei is not opposed, but as is his practice, he will need to talk with local stakeholders before throwing his full support behind it," spokesman Brian Baluta said.

Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., wouldn't even go that far.

"Senator Heller is continuing to review this legislation," spokeswoman Chandler Smith wrote in response to the proposal.

Rep. Steven Horsford, R-Nev., was also noncommittal.

"At this point, Congressman Horsford will further review the bill to determine what it means for Nevada," spokesman Tim Hogan said.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., is in favor of the bill, said spokeswoman Kristen Orthman.

Although the bill appears non-controversial, it doesn't make it a slam dunk, according to Orthman.

"It has been tough to move any land bills, frankly," she said.

Earlier this year a bill with bipartisan, Nevada support to create the Tule Springs Fossil Bed National Monument got derailed in the House after Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, a leader on the Natural Resources Committee, sponsored a change that would have directed proceeds of public land auctions in Nevada back to Washington, D.C.

Oxborrow, 72, who has done the Nevada section of the trail about a dozen times, has no plans to back off lobbying in favor of the designation. He's already got signs to post as soon as he can get approval from the Bureau of Land Management, which needs Congress to act first.

"People question why I do this," Oxborrow said. "The answer is because I have a history here."

His great-grandparents, Mary and Joseph Oxborrow, helped found the small town of Lund in the late 19th century. Oxborrow, of Carson City, acknowledges his style of persuasion could be grating to lawmakers and their representatives.

"I'm older and I tend to be less patient with bureaucracy," he said. "I tend to say 'let's cut the crap and get to the heart of it'."