

Rep. Peter Welch today voted against House legislation that would grant the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) a blanket waiver from dozens of environmental, public land management and other laws when conducting border control activities on public lands within 100 miles of U.S. borders. The proposal would affect over 193,000 acres of public lands in Vermont.

“This proposal is inappropriate, completely unnecessary and a potentially dangerous overreach,” Welch said. “No federal agency should have a blank check to run roughshod over environmental protections. DHS Secretary Napolitano has not asked for and does not want a blank check. This bad idea should be categorically rejected.”

The National Security and Federal Lands Protection Act (H.R. 1505) would create a 100-mile “Operational Control Zone” for DHS, exempting it from 39 laws designed to protect the environment and the public’s access to hunting and fishing lands, parks and federal forests. If enacted, H.R. 1505 would effectively allow DHS to set up facilities and conduct border control activities in the Operational Control Zone as it sees fit, bypassing existing review processes.

Proponents of H.R. 1505 say existing laws and protections hinder border security. But a 2010 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report concluded that 22 of the 26 DHS stations surveyed reported that the overall security status of their jurisdiction “is not affected by land management laws.” DHS Secretary Napolitano has characterized the bill as unnecessary and bad policy.

H.R. 1505 passed the House today as a part of a package of land use bills.