

CRS Report for Congress

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Biosphere Reserves: Fact Sheet

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Summary

Since 1972, the United States has participated in the Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB), coordinated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As part of the U.S. MAB program, 47 biosphere reserves have been established in the United States. These sites are part of a network of 324 such areas worldwide in which scientists conduct research and communicate about their findings. Biosphere reserves are nominated by the country in which they are located, and no change in jurisdiction or sovereignty occurs as a result. However, controversy has arisen over the past 3 years over the connection to the United Nations and fears by some commentators and organizations that U.S. sovereignty may be affected. The American Land Sovereignty Protection Act, H.R. 901, was introduced to address these concerns by imposing extensive conditions on the program; it has been reported by the Resources Committee and is likely to be considered by the House in October. Another bill would authorize the program to operate very much as it currently does, while others would restrict appropriations for agencies participating in the programs.

Background. "Biosphere Reserve" is a term denoting an area that has been nominated by the locality and the country in which it is located for participation in the worldwide Biosphere Reserve Program under the U.S. Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB), and accepted for such recognition by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Areas are nominated by a country and recognized by UNESCO on the basis of their significance for research and study of representative biological regions of the world. The United States has 47 biosphere reserves, part of a worldwide network of 324 biosphere reserves in 82 countries.

Biosphere Reserve recognition does not convey any control or jurisdiction over such sites to the United Nations or to any other entity. The United States and/or state and local communities where biosphere reserves are located continue to exercise the same jurisdiction as that in place before designation. Areas are listed only at the request of the country in which they are located, and can be removed from the biosphere reserve list at any time by a request from that country.

Following controversy over concerns raised about the connection of this program to the United Nations, legislation has been introduced to require congressional authorization of all nominations of biosphere reserve sites, and to assure that commercial uses of such sites would not be restricted by their inclusion in the program. In addition, amendments have been passed to the Interior Department and several other appropriations bills to prohibit obligation or expenditure of funds for the MAB Biosphere Reserve program and the World Heritage program.

The Biosphere Reserve System. The Biosphere Reserve network was established in 1968 as one program area of the Man and the Biosphere program of UNESCO, which operates through independent national committees in each of the 114 participating countries. The U.S. MAB program operates under the U.S. National MAB Committee, which coordinates six "directorates" studying various kinds of environmental and biological regions and issues. One of these six directorates is the Biosphere Reserve Directorate. The U.S. MAB Committee is composed of scientists from universities, government agencies, and other members from entities such as private conservation organizations.

The purpose of the Biosphere Reserve program is to promote cooperation and communication among a worldwide network of areas that would include all the major ecosystem types globally, with sites identified as areas where research on ecological concerns--especially the impacts of human activity on ecological systems--could be performed. A major goal of the network is to allow comparative work in various countries in similar, or dissimilar, areas to assess how the systems work and how they can be used productively without destroying their essential ecological properties and life-support potential.

Criteria for Biosphere Reserves. In order to facilitate research on ecosystems in various stages of protection and development, biosphere reserves meet these criteria: (1) they have a legally protected core area relatively free from outside or human activity--in the United States, usually an already designated park, wilderness or wildlife refuge area; (2) there is a "buffer zone" or zones, surrounding or contiguous to the core area, where human activity is carried out, but generally at low/rural intensity and types of activity that are compatible with conservation objectives; and (3) transitional areas outside the buffer zone where human activity is more intensified, but presumably with some cooperative effort underway in these adjacent communities to achieve sustainable development in which conservation and economic development are jointly pursued according to the values and guidance of the local community.

When a local community, state, or national MAB committee begins to pursue recognition of the area as a biosphere reserve, these criteria are usually already being met. It is not expected that steps will have to be taken to create core areas or change activity patterns after recognition. However, local communities are encouraged to develop cooperative mechanisms to maximize opportunities for the research and information focus of the Biosphere Reserve program.

Designation Process for Biosphere Reserves. An area to be considered for recognition as a Biosphere Reserve is nominated--only with the support of the local community--and the nomination is considered by the U.S. National Committee. Documentation on the recommended area and how it meets the criteria of the Biosphere

Reserve system is assembled locally and forwarded by the U.S. MAB program to the International Coordinating Council (ICC) of the MAB Programme in Paris, which considers the recommendation and makes a decision, which is conveyed to the U.S. MAB Program.

Policy Implications of Designation/Recognition. There are no legally binding requirements on countries or communities regarding the management of biosphere reserves. Full sovereignty and control over the area continues as it was before recognition. The main effect of recognition is to publicize the inclusion of an area in the Biosphere Reserve Network, thus making it known that research on the area's ecosystem type and impacts of adjacent human development on the area is appropriate as part of an international network of such research. It is expected that research in such areas--conducted mainly by private and/or government scientists--will be shared through the Biosphere Reserve program in order to maximize benefits of information exchange.

Funding for the U.S. Biosphere Reserve program is provided by pooled resources from several participating federal agencies; totalling some \$225,000 in FY 1996, funding goes almost entirely to U.S. programs and local organizations, with some relatively small amounts supporting research by U.S. scientists in other countries, or assisting developing country scientists to attend MAB meetings.

U.S. Legislation. Both the MAB Biosphere Reserve Program and the World Heritage Program, due to their UNESCO connection, have raised the suspicion of a number of commentators and organizations who are concerned that designation could result in impingement of U.S. sovereignty or could result in unacceptable limitations on uses of the land. (See also CRS Report 96-395 F, *World Heritage Convention and U.S. National Parks*). Responding to these concerns, H.R. 901, the American Land Sovereignty Protection Act, was introduced in February, and has more than 170 co-sponsors.

This bill, much like its predecessor (H.R. 3752) in the 104th Congress, provides conditions that apply to nominations of sites to the Biosphere Reserve or World Heritage programs. In particular, it would prohibit federal officials from nominating any lands in the United States for designation as a Biosphere Reserve under the MAB program, and would require that all existing Biosphere Reserves would cease to be in effect unless they are specifically authorized by law before December 21, 2000. It would also require that Biosphere Reserves should consist solely of lands owned by the United States and subject to a management plan that "specifically ensures that the use of intermixed or adjacent non-Federal property is not limited or restricted as a result of that designation." Additional reporting requirements would be imposed, for instance to account for money expended and to describe disposition of complaints. It appears that passage of this legislation would significantly limit, or possibly effectively terminate, U.S. participation in the MAB Biosphere Reserve program. H.R. 901 was marked up and reported to the House on June 25, 1997 (H.Rept. 105-245). The bill is expected to be considered by the House during October.

An alternative bill, H.R. 1801, was introduced June 5, 1997, "To authorize the United States Man and the Biosphere Program, and for other purposes." This legislation would provide statutory authority for the MAB Program, providing for its operation much

as it is currently constituted, with designation by the President of a lead agency and authorizing other federal agencies to participate. This bill has 11 co-sponsors.

In other legislation, amendments have been introduced to many of the appropriations bills for agencies that fund the MAB program to prohibit the use of funds for the MAB program. A recorded vote on an amendment to the House Interior Appropriations bill followed a heated debate among House Members who support these programs and those opposing them; the amendment passed 222-203 on July 15. However, the Senate report on the Interior appropriations bill (S.Rept. 105-56) was supportive of both the MAB and World Heritage programs, and struck the House language. Similar amendments, some including the World Heritage Program and some applying only to MAB are included in House appropriations bills for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Defense Department, and the National Science Foundation (NSF), and to authorization bills for State Department and Defense.