

What's next for the Owyhee Canyonlands?

By Amanda Peacher
Oregon Public Broadcasting

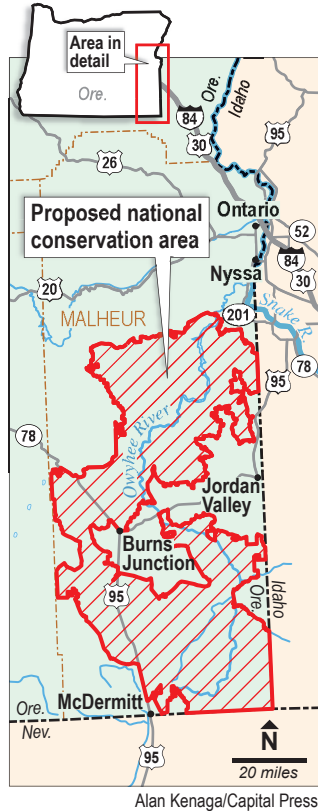
Last year, conservationists made a big push to convince President Obama to create a national monument in a vast area in Southeast Oregon known as the Owyhee.

It's a vast, rugged sagebrush steppe landscape with red rock canyons and unusual geology. But the proposal faced fierce resistance from ranchers and other locals in Malheur County. At the end of his term, the Owyhee was left off of Obama's list of new and expanded monuments.

But the specter of a monument designation may trigger groups on opposite sides to get together and start a collaborative plan for the Owyhee. Tim Davis, with the grassroots conservation group called Friends of the Owyhee, said he believes it's possible to work with groups that opposed the monument.

"If it was a collaborative effort I think they'd be willing to sit down at the table and work it out," he said. "There are areas that both sides can agree on for protection. Jordan Craters, for example. It's a big lava field. Why not start there?"

This wouldn't be the first time that a potential presidential designation has spurred monument opponents to come to the table. On the Idaho side of the Owyhee, the possibility of a national monument designation by President Bill Clinton kick-started a decades-long collaborative process between conservationists, off-road vehicle groups, ranchers and the government. The effort led to new wilderness and wild and scenic river designa-



Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

that dialogue to ensure that the people who know and love this place have their voices heard," Fenty said.

Although there's no official collaborative process in the works yet, groups that opposed the monument have hinted that they'd be willing to have such conversations.

"We're still kind of in awe that we made it past the national monument designation," said Malheur County rancher Elias Eiguren, a spokesman for the Owyhee Basin Stewardship Coalition. But with the threat of a monument behind them, he and other ranchers have been busy with calving season.

"Spring work is hitting us in the face," Eiguren said. "We're trying to just hold together at this point and really decide where we need to go from here."

Eiguren said he's yet to see a federal designation that improved a landscape. He'd like to focus on what he sees as the biggest threats to the Owyhee: invasive weeds and major wildfires. But he wouldn't necessarily try to block a wilderness designation, depending on the circumstances. He said that any collaborative process would need to start with assurances from environmental groups that litigation is off the table.

"I don't know that a wilderness designation wouldn't necessarily change what is out there already so I wouldn't necessarily understand the purpose of that," he said. "But if somebody had to have that, there's always that possibility."

tions in 2009.

A similar process led to the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area in southeast Oregon in 2000. And more recently, the possibility of an Obama designation in Central Idaho led to the hastening of a Republican-championed wilderness area for the Boulder White Clouds mountains.

But there's no exact formula for getting diverse groups together in the wake of such proposals.

"Each place is unique," said Brent Fenty, executive director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association. ONDA has been talking about wilderness designations for the Owyhee for more than a decade, and Fenty said his group plans to hold town hall meetings across the state to further the conversation.

"That's what we're focused on — continuing

Oregon budget hangs on May revenue forecast

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

While lawmakers are now likely negotiating the state's budget behind closed doors, Oregonians may have a better idea of what to expect once state economists present the quarterly revenue forecast in mid-May.

Legislators are required to pass a balanced budget, but face an approximately \$1.6 billion shortfall between what the state expects to bring through the general fund and lottery funds, and what it would take to maintain existing services.

Between those two funds, available revenue is expected to be about \$20.99 billion, according to the most recent quarterly revenue forecast, which was issued in February.

According to Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin, one of the co-chairs of the Joint Ways and Means Committee, which writes the state's budget, the forecast that comes out May 16 gives budget writers "the most accurate picture" of what's to come, once most income tax returns have been filed.

The state's general fund is largely sourced from income taxes; the deadline to file is April 18.

With both budget cuts and new taxes still in the realm of possibility — and with both options imbued with political consequences — Oregon lawmakers could turn to a strategy they've tapped in the past: establishing a bicameral "super committee" to hammer out big-ticket policy items.

Such super committees,

though not common, have emerged in prior legislative sessions. They can form when legislators think it could "help break down some of the institutional barriers" between the Oregon House and Senate, said Jim Moore, professor of political science and director of the Tom McCall Center for Policy Innovation at Pacific University.

Such a mega-committee could include party leadership from both sides of the aisle from each chamber, and possibly members of key policy committees — such as healthcare or education — Moore said.

But if the legislative session starts Feb. 1, why isn't there more public information about what the budget will actually be until three months later?

"When you come out with a budget, you're, in effect, making promises," Moore said. If not all of them can be kept, lawmakers "just don't want to go that far."

Oregon passes its budget in increments, with the biggest components of the budget typically coming first.

Once the most significant pieces of the budget are passed — such as education, public safety and human service programs — budgets for smaller agencies and programs fall into place, Moore said.

This session, lawmakers are also trying to craft a transportation funding package. Health care costs are another significant challenge for the state as the federal government gradually tapers its support to states for the Medicaid expansion.

LEGISLATIVE BRIEFCASE

Bills would relax Oregon land use rules

Multiple bills aim to relax restrictions on building homes and businesses in Oregon's rural areas, but they face short lives unless lawmakers soon take action.

Exemptions to Oregon's statewide land use planning system would give local governments more flexibility under the five bills, which received a hearing April 6 from the Senate Environment Committee.

• Senate Bill 432 would allow local governments to create land use plans without complying with statewide goals as long as they're in counties with fewer than 50,000 people and haven't grown since the previous federal census.

• Senate Bill 602 would allow local governments to waive land use requirements to create a five-year supply of "shovel ready employment sites."

• Senate Bill 608 would allow local governments to expedite the growth of urban growth boundaries if they meet certain criteria for population growth.

• Senate Bill 612 would allow local governments experiencing unemployment and poverty to take an exception from a land use goal if it creates at least five jobs paying four times the federal poverty rate.

• Senate Bill 618 would allow local governments to waive a land use goal in the event of a "land use emergency."

As deadline looms, no clear PERS plan has emerged

With a legislative deadline less than two weeks away, it's not yet clear what legislators may propose this session to reduce the costs of the state's public pension system.

The chair of the senate committee vetting proposals that would affect the Public Employees Retirement System said Wednesday that there is no specific policy proposal edging out others.

"Right now, I would say that all of them are up for discussion at this point," Sen. Kathleen Taylor, D-Portland, said. "That's the climate that we're in, we're still talking about all of the different proposals."

Committees vetting policy, such as the Senate Workforce Committee, have to schedule work sessions on bills by Friday. April 18 is the last day bills can move out of committee in the chamber where they are proposed.

As of Wednesday evening, some proposals that have taken center stage in the public process in the first two months of the legislative session — such as capping the salary amount used in calculating benefits to \$100,000, or calculating an employee's final average salary over five rather than three years — were not scheduled for a work session, according to the state's legislative information system.

New hurdle proposed for solar projects on high-value farmland

Solar power facilities on high-value farmland in Oregon would have to clear a new hurdle under a bill being considered by state lawmakers.

Commercial developers would first have to demonstrate that alternative sites aren't available under House Bill 3050, a requirement that currently applies to solar facilities larger than 12 acres.

Proponents of the bill say the new test would discourage conversion of the state's most productive land.

Critics of the bill countered that the new requirement is overly broad and ignores existing rules that protect farmland.

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