

TRAIN

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The train, which has three passenger cabs, can usually fit 150 passengers, but the current capacity is 100. This is likely to increase as COVID-19 restrictions continue to lessen, according to Spaulding.

A ride through history

The excursion takes place on the Joseph Branch — also known as the Wallowa Union Railroad — between Elgin and Minam, which used to be part of the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company. Between World War I and the Great Depression, this section was used for hauling logs to sawmills and operating a daily passenger train between La Grande and Portland.

Both freight and passenger trains operated frequently on the railroad until 1993, when Union Pacific sold the Joseph Branch to Idaho Northern & Pacific. After several years of uncertainty regarding the railroad's future, the Oregon Legislature approved \$2 million to Union and Wallowa counties to purchase the Joseph Branch.

In 2003, the counties bought the railroad section and the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority was formed to maintain the excursion line. In 2012, a Connect Oregon grant was given to the organization to build the Elgin Depot, which has a gift shop and train artifacts dating back to



Riders enjoy the first Eagle Cap Excursion Train ride of the year on Saturday, July 3, 2021. Seats were spread out to accommodate social distancing, which is still required on public transportation.



The Eagle Cap Excursion Train rounds a curve on Saturday, July 3, 2021. The first excursion of the season took passengers along the Grande Ronde River for a 3-1/2 hour round trip.



The Eagle Cap Excursion Train sits outside the Elgin Depot on Saturday, July 3, 2021. The train has not given any public rides since the 2019 season, due to COVID-19.

the railroad's early days. Now, the Friends of the Joseph Branch hope to expand the excursion train's programs.

"There's so many tourists that come through this area, so there's all kinds of things that we want to do to bring more people out here," Spaulding said. "For example, there's been talk of a path for bikes and people to travel along the railroad, and they could take the train one way if they wanted to. Also, fishermen have expressed interest in a shuttle system so the train could bring them back from a fishing trip."

The Eagle Cap Excursion Train runs almost entirely through volunteers, who spend much of their time preparing the train and ensuring that passengers are having a good experience.

"I've been volunteering here for a few years, and it doesn't get old," Sirrime said. "This stuff just gets in your blood. We love doing this."

RIVERS

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chance to have discussions with Wyden and Merkley or their staffs about the legislation.

"We want a seat at the table," she said.

Hank Stern, Wyden's Oregon press secretary, in an email said Wyden's staff met with elected officials in Union County earlier during the process of determining which portions of rivers and creeks in Union County would be designated as wild or scenic under the proposed River Democracy Act.

Stern said Wyden is encouraging all Oregonians to provide input regarding modification in the legislation and the river and creek segments proposed for inclusion.

"Sen. Wyden strongly encourages folks in Eastern Oregon and statewide to take up that offer and bring forth substantive ideas to make the bill even better," Stern said. "Senator Wyden believes strongly in the 'Oregon Way,' namely that community input is a must for legislation."

He said that it is in the 'Oregon Way' spirit that he wants the introduction of the proposed River Democracy Act to now open a new round of conversations among Oregonians about preserving and protecting rivers and streams.

Pace slowdown requested

Beverage is worried that if the River Democracy Act is pushed through Congress too quickly, it would not give people a chance to give input.

"What is the big hurry? We should not rush through this," she said.

Beverage said Union County has received very limited information about the potential impact of the River Democracy Act.

"We are in the dark," she said.

Commissioner Matt Scarfo said he is disappointed in the lack of information that has been provided by Wyden and Merkley about the River Democracy Act, especially because it could have such a big effect on Union County.

Some of the only information Union County has been provided includes a



The Wallowa River passes by Minam on Saturday, July 3, 2021. The Union County Board of Commissioners has opposed a bill called the River Democracy Act, which would add protection to 135 miles of rivers and streams in Union County, though the bill does not specify their location.

list of 26 stretches of rivers and creeks that have been proposed for wild or scenic designation under the River Democracy Act. The precise locations of the designated portions are not identified but their length is.

The longest stretches, according to information provided by Merkley's office to Union County, would be: 11.6 miles on Beaver Creek, 10.8 miles on Five Points Creek, 9.5 miles on Indian Creek, 8.7 miles on the south fork of Catherine Creek, 8.2 miles in the "lower upper" Grande Ronde River, 7.9 miles on the "upper upper" Grande Ronde River, 7.6 miles on Mottet Creek, 7.4 miles on Clear Creek and 7.3 miles on Lookingglass Creek.

Each section of river and creek designated as wild or scenic by the River Democracy Act would have a half-mile buffer off each side of its bank, meaning about 86,000 acres of land in Union County would be in a buffer zone where there could be significant land use restrictions, Beverage said.

The buffer areas might be off limits to the county when it comes to removal of trees and vegetation to

prevent the buildup of wild-fire fuels. Beverage said she fears this would give the county less options for making buffer zones less vulnerable to wildfires.

Impact on grazing feared

Beverage is also worried that designating more miles of rivers and streams for wild and scenic status could have a negative impact on ranchers who might not be able to graze their livestock in the half-mile buffer areas.

"We do not want to shut down grazing," she said.

Stern wrote that these concerns are addressed by the River Democracy Act bill. He said grazing would not be a concern because representatives of the Forest Service have testified that the River Democracy Act bill "gives land managers sufficient flexibility to work with grazing permittees to allow for future grazing to increase."

Stern also noted that some of those who nominated stretches of rivers for wild and scenic status are ranchers. The press secretary also said the River Democracy Act bill would

not increase fire risks.

"This bill requires the Forest Service and BLM to do as much fire risk reduction around rivers as possible, specific authorizations for treatments that don't often get done," he said.

Stern added the bill requires the Forest Service and BLM to establish fire management plans and cooperative agreements with states and local governments to allow thinning and treatments in riparian areas. Stern said that would reduce the risk for catastrophic fires, including those that threaten homes and other structures.

Still, Beverage fears that fire risk could be heightened by the passage of the River Democracy Act because federal agencies, such as the Forest Service, might not have the neces-

sary funding to do tree and vegetation thinning work in buffer zones.

Passage of the River Democracy Act would boost the number of miles of rivers and creeks in Oregon that are part of the Wild and Scenic system to 6,857, according to Stern. This would be about 6% of Oregon's 110,994 miles of rivers and streams.

No rivers or creeks in Union County are currently part of Oregon's Wild and Scenic system, Beverage said.

The 2,173 miles of rivers and creeks Oregon currently has in its Wild and Scenic system are among more than 12,700 miles of rivers and creeks protected in the United States

by the national Wild and Scenic Rivers Act Congress passed in 1968, according to the U.S. Forest Service's website.

Rivers and creeks selected for wild and scenic status must be bordered by federal land and are supposed to have special elements that wild and scenic status would help protect. Beverage said she doesn't know of any unique features, such as a monument, that wild and scenic designations would help secure in Union County. Beverage added she also does not know of any problems such a designation would help address.

"I do not see any problems that need to be fixed," she said.

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