



Nick Smith/Contributed Photo, File

Andy Geissler, federal timber program director for the American Forest Resource Council, straddles a dry creek in Southern Oregon. The creek is one of many nominated as a Wild and Scenic River under the federal River Democracy Act. Rep. Cliff Bentz spoke in opposition to the 2021 bill on the House floor Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022.

BENTZ

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threat of fires. "I cannot emphasize enough how dangerous it is to use prescribed burns in overgrown, densely packed, dry forests without thinning the forest first," he said. "Prescribed burning before thinning puts at extreme risk the very rivers and watersheds the designation is supposed to protect. It is like dropping a match in a tinderbox. It is impossible to contain these types of fires once they start. "The River Democracy Act, if passed, would threaten watersheds, homes, businesses, farms, ranches, livestock and, most importantly, human lives." Bentz also denounced the bill for not containing "explicit protections" for uses of the land, including, "sustainable timber harvests, hunting, grazing, fishing and mining." "Regardless of legislative intent, the applicable agencies will have broad authority to restrict these activities," he said.

Plenty of disapproval

The RDA, introduced last year by Sen. Ron Wyden and backed by Sen. Jeff Merkley, both Oregon

Democrats, has been condemned by several county commissioners in Eastern Oregon. Union County commissioners voted in October 2021 to send a letter to Wyden asking him to remove the roughly 135 miles of waterways in their county from the act. Part of their issue with the RDA, they claimed, was that methods in place for designating rivers as Wild and Scenic were not adhered to. "This failure to follow the guidelines that have been in place since 1968 as a well-vetted system for designation is resulting in waterways that do not meet the criteria, spirit, intent or letter of the Wild and Scenic Act," according to the letter sent to Wyden. Wallowa County commissioners have opposed the RDA on multiple occasions, and have said about 404 miles in their county would fall under the new designation. They also wrote an October letter to Wyden voicing their disapproval of a lack of detailed maps outlining the affected waterways. "The maps your office provided were not clear so the county went to the expense of having maps made that included half-mile buffers," they wrote.

"These maps gave a visual of the buffers, affecting economic viability for our timber and grazing economies, public access and forest management on an estimated 240,000 acres of public lands and 16,000 acres of adjacent private land in Wallowa County." Grant County commissioners have also sought out of the RDA. "Prohibiting access to minerals that are necessary for creating green energy runs counter to the principles of conservation," they wrote in a November letter opposing the RDA. "In this respect, Senator Wyden's proposal is fundamentally anti-environmental." The River Democracy Act also came under criticism in June for including waterways that were "completely dry upon inspection." The American Forest Resources Council, which represents the timber industry, said just 15% of the waterways are designated as rivers. Senate Bill 192, which was introduced Feb. 3, 2021, has been before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, according to congress.gov. It has yet to receive a vote on the House or Senate floor.

ELGIN

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drive-by shootings. We don't have a lot of this stuff that the larger towns have," she said. "I walk a lot, at night sometimes." Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen stated there is no recent criminal activity that would give credence to a specific ref-

erence to Elgin as an unsafe city. "I don't know what she would be referring to, other than reaching out to the furthest part of the state," he said. Johnson, a former state senator for District 16, resigned Dec. 15 from the Oregon Legislature to focus full-time on her statewide run. She represented a swath of North-

western Oregon since 2001 that included Clatsop, Tillamook, Columbia, Multnomah and Washington counties. Johnson is aiming to be the first independent candidate to become Oregon governor since Julius L. Meier did so in 1931. She will need to collect approximately 24,000 signatures to make it on the 2022 November ballot.

CATTLE

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The Deans also own ranches in Colorado and New Mexico. Dean said one of their wranglers from New Mexico visited the Oregon ranch to see what was happening. She said the wrangler said ranchers normally round up their cattle, take them to a pen and put them aboard a truck to ship to market. "He said they don't do that (in Wallowa County)," Dean said. "They let (the cattle) find their own way down."

was never officially named or authorized to act as manager, which left me without decision-making authority to act in critical situations. We had a main crew of seven people gathering Dean Oregon Ranches cattle. We are very proud of all of their hard work and the fact that they have stuck with the job despite extenuating circumstances."

Attorney involved

Chris Gramiccioni, a South Carolina-based attorney for the Deans in their ongoing lawsuits over handling of nursing home evacuations last year at the time of Hurricane Ida, said the Deans and their attorneys were just learning of the situation with the cattle.

"My client is not happy with what happened to those cattle," he said. "My client had a team of people who were supposed to bring the cattle down from the mountains." Gramiccioni, who said the Deans have paid to fly in hay and help rescue the cattle, declined to comment specifically if Dean Oregon Ranches shared responsibility for the fate of the cows and their calves. "I have to be cautious on answering that because it could be the subject of litigation," he said. "Our client is taking it very seriously. It's not something he's taking lightly."

In an emailed statement, Gramiccioni said Dean Oregon Ranches have historically entrusted livestock management to a local onsite expert familiar with the land in Wallowa County. "Thankfully, most

livestock were recovered before the snows made routes impassable. Dean crews have worked tirelessly to ensure the care and feeding of the remaining animals while ongoing efforts are undertaken to bring them back down to the ranch," he said. "The Dean family is truly grateful for the continued recovery efforts by local ranchers, state and county government officials, and volunteers. It is hoped and prayed that the continued search for the remaining cows will be successful, and we wish to ensure the community that rescue efforts will remain unwavering."

B.J. Warnock said on Jan. 2 that when they began gathering the cattle in September, there were 1,613 Dean Oregon Ranches mother cows on summer range. Of those, 10 were found unrecoverable and 1,548 Dean Oregon Ranches mother cows were successfully gathered before the snows of late December. Since then, another 34 mother cows were gathered in joint efforts between the ranch crew and the community. Warnock said 26 of those were Dean Oregon Ranches cattle and the others were owned by neighboring ranches.

As of Monday, Jan. 10, no updated figures on the number of cattle lost or saved were available. As for the Deans' troubles over the nursing homes, the Advocate of Baton Rouge reported that the Louisiana Department of Health pulled the licenses of seven nursing homes owned by the Deans in the wake of Hurricane Ida.

CHURCH

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voting in the first presidential election open to 18-year-olds following the 1971 passage of the 26th Amendment, which lowered the voting age of 21 by three years, Church said she was so excited to be casting a ballot and little did she know what the future would hold for her. "I had never given that possibility any consideration," she said of her eventual career. "It had never crossed my mind." Still, she is looking forward to retirement because of the opportunity it will provide her to see more of the United States and the world. "I have a bucket list of places I want to visit," Church said. John Howard, a former member of the Board of the Union County Commissioners, said he has long been impressed with the job Church does. "She never missed a beat. Every count was done on time," he said, adding that Church has assembled a good staff. Union County Commissioner Donna Beverage also speaks highly of Church. "She has a passion for doing everything correctly

and honestly. She has done a great job and I have really enjoyed working with her," she said. Church's successor will be elected later this year in a nonpartisan election. To date, one candidate has filed to run, Lisa Feik, the chief deputy of the Union County clerk's office. Feik has worked in the clerk's office for about 11 years. A fan of vote by mail A lot has changed on the county election front since Church joined the Union County clerk's office. The biggest was the switch to vote-by-mail elections. All elections in Union County and Oregon have been vote by mail since 1998 following the passage of a measure in a statewide election. Church credits vote by mail with being a great service to voters because of the convenience it offers as opposed to poll booth elections. "You get to vote while drinking coffee in the comfort of your home, while others are standing outside in the heat, wind and rain waiting to vote," she said. The county clerk said that running vote-by-mail elections is far easier than the traditional poll booth elections. "They were a huge

amount of work," she said. Church said three people were needed to work election day at each of Union County's more than 50 polling places, and were paid minimum wage. They were expected to work from 6 a.m. until past 8 p.m. when the polls closed. Church said it was extremely difficult to get the necessary number of people needed to work at polling places. Running vote-by-mail elections, however, does pose a different set of challenges. One of the biggest involves making sure the signatures on the envelopes match those the county clerk's office has on file. This was once a very time-consuming and tedious task because all signatures on file had to be pulled out by hand and then compared to the ones on envelopes. The process became much easier after a computer database of all the signatures of registered voters in Union County was created by Richard Chaves, of Baker City. This has streamlined the voter signatures verification process tremendously. "Verifying signatures became so much easier," she said. "That was exciting." Computers have been a godsend to the vote-

counting process, but they have also taken away a bit of the charm of election night. Church said that years ago the county clerk's office and the hallway outside it would be filled with candidates, community members and journalists waiting for the releases of the latest vote counts on election night. Today, few if any of these people are in the county clerk's office on election night because they can get the latest updates online. "I miss that part. It was fun," she said of the crowded election nights. Other duties The county clerk's office is involved in many other things in addition to elections, including weddings. The clerk's office sells marriage licenses, and the county clerk is authorized to officiate at weddings. As county clerk, Church has found herself at a number of weddings serving in an official capacity. "I liked seeing people on what may have been the happiest day of their lives," she said. Record keeping is another task assigned to the Union County Clerk's office, one which takes up perhaps more time than running elections. The county clerk's office is responsible for storing

the county's permanent records, including deeds, mortgages and all of the Union County Board of Commissioner resolutions, ordinances and minutes. Her office, because it is such a storehouse of information, fields many interesting requests. "The other day we had to find a cattle brand used in 1905," she said. Church said the process of record keeping has become much more efficient in the digital age. Before advances in digitalization, four paper copies of many documents had to be made. "Our copy machines were running all the time," she said. "We were wearing them out."

The ever-buoyant and upbeat Church, who appears anything but worn out after 30 years in the Union County Clerk's office, said she feels blessed when reflecting upon her life and career. "I have no regrets," she said. "There is not much in my life I would do over."

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