Oregon groups sign letter supporting River Democracy Act

By MICHAEL KOHN
The Bulletin

BEND — A plan to protect thousands of miles of rivers and streams in Oregon received renewed attention last week when dozens of organizations banded together to encourage politicians to speed up the passage of the bill.

Seventy-five organizations across the state sent a joint letter to Oregon Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley urging them to pass the River Democracy Act. The letter is signed mainly by conservation groups and outdoor sporting and fishing organizations.

If passed, the bill would add nearly 4,700 miles of rivers and streams in Oregon to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The federal designation, created in 1968, protects rivers and develops them for tourism, just as national parks and national forests protect designated areas of land. Rivers can be listed as having wild, scenic or recreational value.

Wyden and Merkley introduced the River Democracy Act, Senate Bill 192, in February 2021. More than 15,000 streams and rivers were nominated by Oregonians for inclusion in the act after Wyden called on state residents to suggest their favorite waterways in 2019.

But the bill has its detractors too.

Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Land surrounding Northeastern Oregon's Imnaha River would be affected if the waterway is designated as "wild and scenic" under the proposed River Democracy Act.

In January, U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, spoke out against the act on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, declaring that it will create a wildfire risk in Oregon's watersheds. Bentz argued that the act puts forests at risk because it allows prescribed burns without conducting thinning operations.

The American Forest Resources Council, which represents logging interests, is among the groups that defend Bentz's position.

"We continue to oppose the River Democracy Act because it will increase the risk of severe wildfires, threaten our communities, impede public access, and impact multiple uses of public lands," said Nick Smith, the council's public affairs director. "Catastrophic wildfires including subsequent erosion and sedimentation pose the greatest threat to watersheds and rivers, and water quantity and quality."

Smith said more management of federal lands will help reduce wildfire.

"Rather than imposing more arbitrary designations and restrictions on federal lands, Oregon's federal representatives should focus on giving public lands managers more resources and tools to proactively reduce wildfire risks, maintain access, and protect our forests, rivers, and communities," said Smith.

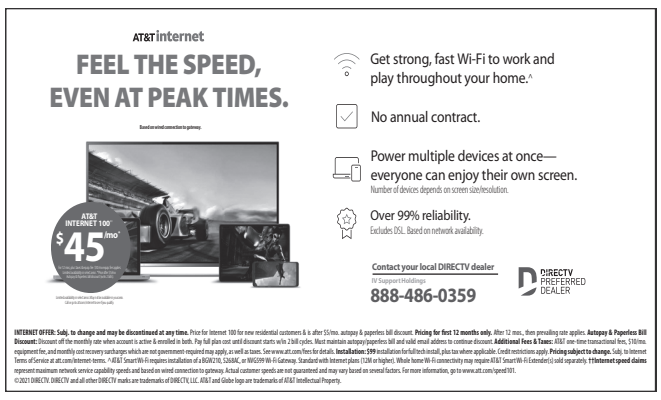
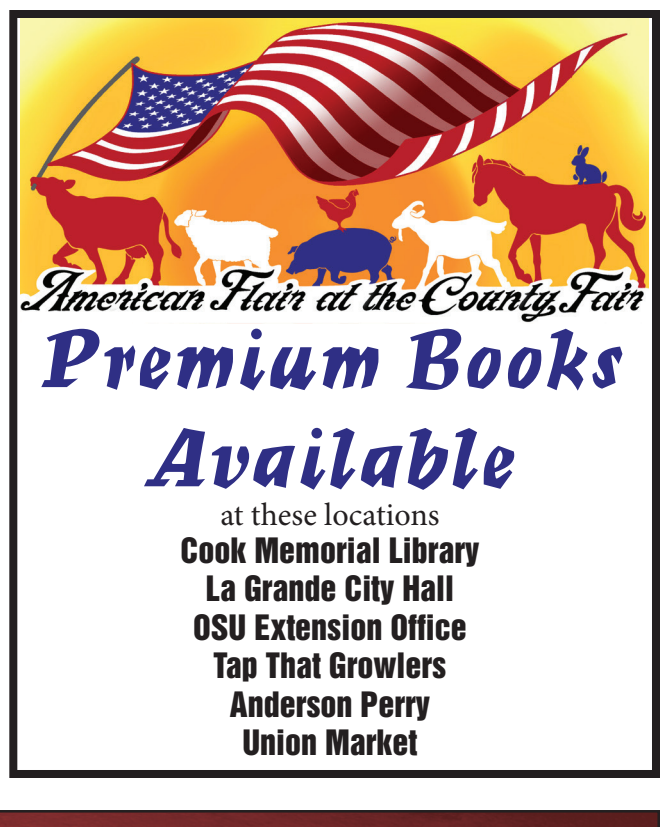
Wyden's office has pushed back against the argument that forests will be at a greater risk for fire, stating that the bill requires agencies to implement a fire risk-reduction plan across a half-mile corridor on either side of a river or stream.

The letter sent last week was supported by riverkeeper groups, guiding associations, watershed councils and paddling clubs, among others.

"Although our groups represent a wide variety of interests, purposes, and people across the state, we all have at least one thing in common — a love of Oregon's rivers," stated a portion of the letter. "They provide us with clean drinking water, our favorite swimming holes, and places to take our families fishing and boating."

The designations would add 4,684 miles to the Wild and Scenic River system in Oregon, including 135 miles in Union County.

The next step for the act is a vote by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which is chaired by West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a Democrat.

Wyden told The Bulletin that public lands bills tend to get a close look at the end of the year, and he is preparing to have it voted on in the Senate by that time. His office is in communication with Manchin specifically to seek the necessary votes to get the bill passed.

"In terms of public lands, we're going to fairly soon have some mark-ups, where the legislation is formally considered and pulling out all the stops for it," said Wyden. "We are getting all the small businesses from rural Oregon behind it and we are pleased about the coalition coming together."