

Wyden to move ahead with Owyhee wilderness bill

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Sen. Ron Wyden plans to reintroduce legislation that would designate more than 1.1 million acres of the Owyhee River Canyonlands in Malheur County, Ore., as wilderness.

He and Sen. Jeff Merkley, both D-Ore., in November 2019 introduced the Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act. Senate Bill 2828 received a hearing before a public-lands subcommittee last September. The 2019-20 Congress adjourned without taking further formal action.

A diverse group of stakeholders including ranchers, environmental groups and community leaders crafted the legislation. It aims in part to safeguard habitat while protecting historical uses such as grazing.

"I'm definitely going to pull out all the stops to get this enacted in this Congress because this is a fresh approach to managing public lands," Wyden said during a Feb. 5 virtual town hall with residents of Malheur, Harney and Baker counties.



Courtesy Bureau of Land Management

The Owyhee River canyon in Oregon, part of an area proposed to be designated wilderness.

Concerns expressed included that using a programmatic Environmental Impact Statement process for the large area rather than the narrower, project-level EIS doesn't allow enough public input or sufficient scrutiny of grazing permits; the stakeholder group should be subject to Federal Advisory Committee Act

guidelines; and the bill should have monitoring money up-front.

Wyden said he would respond to all concerns.

"The bill is not done until the bill is done, but we've got to keep everybody together on this," he said.

"When you are working on a public-lands bill, nobody gets every-

thing they want or everything they think they ought to have," Wyden said. "But the question is can you get something done 'the Oregon way' to achieve your core objectives?"

He said there is "a lot of goodwill" among agriculture, environmental and other interests. Each has sacrificed something in creating the bill.

"I don't want these decisions made in Washington," Wyden said. "We can do it. That's the Oregon way. We have shown the country we've got a new approach for public lands, so let's find a way working together to get it done."

Tim Davis of Ontario, Ore.-based Friends of the Owyhee said in an interview that it is likely the bill would be introduced unchanged from the previous congressional session. Any subsequent changes would come from the legislative process in Washington, D.C. — not from local stakeholders — as occurred when Congress in 2009 passed the Owyhee Initiative designating Idaho wilderness.

"The skeleton of what we put

forward needs to stay intact," said Owyhee Basin Stewardship Coalition Treasurer Elias Eiguren, a southeastern Oregon rancher. "There is some room for certain fine-tuning, but the authority of the Malheur CEO Group (of stakeholders) needs to be such that the group can fine-tune implementation of the legislation and respond to on-the-ground conditions."

The bill would allow grazing to continue, including in newly designated wilderness areas. It would give wilderness protection to parts of the Trout Creek Mountains, Castle Rock, Leslie Gulch, Honeycombs, Three Forks and Jordan Craters.

It would not create a national monument, amend the Taylor Grazing Act, impede current projects, impact water rights or irrigation districts, or affect management of Owyhee Reservoir.

The plan includes maintaining existing roads and establishing "loop roads" designed to encourage tourism and improve access for firefighting.

Bureau of Reclamation seeks solutions to seeping canals

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press

DENVER — The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation is seeking innovative solutions to reduce water seepage in open irrigation canals across the West.

Applicants can submit their ideas to the agency as part of the "Water America's Crops Challenge," in partnership with the HeroX, an online crowdsourcing platform.

"The goal here is what are those outside-the box, innovative solutions to make sure we're maximizing the efficiency of our water delivery system, while also improving their reliability," said Evan Lindenbach, civil engineer with the Bureau of Reclamation in Denver.

The bureau is the nation's largest wholesale water supplier, managing 8,116 miles of canals to deliver water for 30 million customers and 10 million acres of farmland in six western regions — including the Pacific Northwest.

Seepage is one of the largest potential losses of water within the system, Lindenbach said. The bureau has experimented with different solutions in the past, primarily heavy duty liners made out of concrete, plastic and other materials.

But those come with a tradeoff, Lindenbach said. Issues with effectiveness, durability and maintenance can all increase costs for the agency and local communities.

The challenge seeks solutions that will minimize maintenance costs, while maximizing water savings across a variety of regions and climates.

"We have canals all the way from northern Montana to Arizona," Lindenbach said. "Some are more efficient than others, but seepage out of canals is obviously a loss to the end user."

Proposals are due by



Kennewick Irrigation District

Water flows in a Kennewick Irrigation District canal in south-central Washington. The Bureau of Reclamation is offering cash prizes for ways to reduce seepage from irrigation canals.

June 24. Lindenbach said the bureau will select five finalists, who will receive \$50,000 to develop and test a lab-scale prototype of their design.

"What I think is really exciting is this opportunity to get funding to forward their solution to a prototype scale," he said.

Finalists will be announced Sept. 9, with lab testing slated to begin in June 2022. The bureau will select a winner by January 2023 that will receive a \$90,000 prize.

This is not the first time the bureau has used crowdsourcing to solve problems. Lindenbach said the agency has conducted 27 challenges over the last six years, awarding more than \$3 million in cash prizes.

Challenges typically center on water availability, infrastructure and the environment, he said.

Christian Cotichini, CEO of HeroX, said water seepage impacts a critical part of U.S. infrastructure, and requires innovations that are both effective and economically sustainable.

"This is where the crowd can step in, with brilliant minds working worldwide to protect one of our most valuable resources: our

water," Cotichini said.

To learn more about the challenge, visit www.herox.com/WaterAmericasCrops.

Tensions run high on Capitol Hill

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C.

— The dairy industry has a lot of issues to pursue on Capitol Hill against a backdrop of a narrowly divided Congress, a new administration and a high degree of turbulence.

"The atmosphere on Capitol Hill is unlike anything I've ever witnessed before, just given the turbulent times we've been through in the last several weeks," said Paul Bleiberg, senior vice president of government affairs for the National Milk Producers Federation.

"I think there is significant mistrust between the two parties right now. There is a great deal of skepticism about what can be accomplished working together," he said.

At the same time, a new administration is trying

to find its footing during really unprecedented times, he said during the latest "Dairy Defined" podcast.

The pandemic is upending everything that's done on a daily basis. It's created challenges for the administration and the new Congress, he said.

"And when you factor in the political temperature ... it's a very tense atmosphere right now," he said.

It's possible that time heals a lot of things over the course of the next few weeks and people will get down to work, but it starts off very heated, he said.

The top issues on Capitol Hill right now are another COVID-19 stimulus package, nominee confirmations and former President Trump's impeachment trial.

The Biden administration is taking a look at what the next COVID package is going to be and how it will be structured, he said.

The question is whether it will be a bipartisan matter or whether Democrats are going to pass it through budget reconciliation if they're unable to get enough Republican votes for something on the scale they want. Decisions have to be made on how they're going to proceed, he said.

As for confirmations, the Senate does seem to be moving at a relatively quick pace now after some organizing delays, he said.

"But it's also important to factor in that in a couple of weeks, the Senate will go through the impeachment trial. And depending on how that plays, that will impact the temperature and tensions again and may impact the ability for bipartisanship on either the nominees or the COVID package," he said.

As for National Milk, it will continue to build on the successes it had in 2020, he said.

Raw butter supporters call for legalization in Oregon

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

Raw butter sales would be legalized in Oregon under a bill that supporters claim will offer new options to dairy farmers and consumers without sacrificing food safety.

House Bill 2612 would allow for the sale of butter from unpasteurized milk and direct the state's Department of Agriculture to establish grades and standards for the product.

Violations of these regulations for raw butter would be punishable by up to a year in prison, a criminal fine of \$6,250 and a civil penalty of \$10,000.

Billie Johnson, a Crook County dairy farmer and

proponent of HB 2612, said that raw butter acts as "brain food" that is reliably consumed without making people sick.

"Businesses are asking us for this product," she said during a recent hearing before the House Agricultural and Natural Resources Committee.

The Organic Pastures Dairy in Fresno, Calif., legally sells butter in California but cannot ship it out of state, said Mark McAfee, its founder.

The industry needs more local producers of raw butter, he said.

"It's a really powerful food, we sell the heck out of it," McAfee said. "We can't make enough raw butter at this point."

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