



The Owyhee Canyonlands span 2.1 million acres across eastern Oregon. The steep canyons, carved out by the Owyhee River, are a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts and home to the world's largest herd of California bighorn sheep. According to the Oregon Natural Desert Association, it represents the largest intact, unprotected stretch in the American West. ONDA is working with other conservation groups and local residents to garner permanent protection for these lands.

PHOTO BY JEREMY FOX / OREGON NATURAL DESERT ASSOCIATION

Our wilderness shortage

Oregon lags behind neighboring states' wilderness protections

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It's been 50 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law, and Oregon is coming up short.

When compared with bordering states, Oregon is dead last in terms of designated wilderness acreage. Additionally, while many western states were able to attach big wilderness provisions to the massive defense bill passed last week by Congress, Oregon's attempts to do the same were blocked by House Republicans.

Only 4 percent of Oregon's land is protected under the Wilderness Act — the highest level of protection a piece of land can be afforded. In comparison, California is 15 percent wilderness designated, Washington is 10 percent, and Idaho is 9 percent.

"I think that when most Oregonians think of their state, they don't realize this," says Oregon Wild Executive Director Sean Stevens. He says Oregon's had a mixed bag of leadership when it comes to protecting its wilderness, and lawmakers "haven't taken fully to heart that 4 percent isn't big enough."

Until last week, Congress hadn't passed a lands package since 2009. In order to increase protected land acreage within their borders, some states resorted to tacking wilderness bills onto the National Defense Authorization Act of 2015 (NDAA) because it's one piece of legislation that Congress moves every year. And this year was no different.

It was a conservation victory for several Western states. Montana, which has only designated 3.75 percent of its land as wilderness, added 67,000 acres to the Bob

State	State Acreage	Wilderness Acreage	Percentage Wilderness
California	99,823,000	14,986,424	15%
Washington	42,612,000	4,423,676	10%
Idaho	52,961,000	4,522,779	9%
Oregon	61,441,000	2,473,207	4%

Numbers represent acreage prior to the passing of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2015. Data compiled by ONDA.

Marshall Wilderness. Colorado, with 5 percent of its state designated wilderness added 108,000 acres to the San Juan National Forest. Washington also took advantage of the bill by adding 22,100 acres to its Alpine Lakes Wilderness.

But Oregon lawmakers were unable to take advantage of this opportunity to significantly increase Oregon's wilderness acreage, despite having reintroduced three land bills last year that would have protected 111,500 acres and 181.9 miles of rivers and creeks. Only one of these three bills, introduced by Oregon senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, made it onto the defense bill. It represents a mere 3.5 percent of the original 111,500 acres — a 4,000-acre expansion of the Oregon Caves.

According to his office, "Sen. Wyden pushed hard to include a number of Oregon wilderness and lands bills in this package, but House Republican leaders blocked each one, with the exception of Oregon Caves. The Senate agreed to attach a number of Oregon priorities to the NDAA bill, including provisions of his O&C lands bill

that would create 87,000 acres of new wilderness and more than 250 miles of new wild and scenic rivers, but House Republicans rejected the proposal outright as a non-starter."

The O&C lands bill, named for the Oregon and California Railroad that once owned the lands, included a bill that had already passed the Senate as a standalone piece of legislation. According to Stevens, had it not been wrapped into the O&C lands bill, it would have "almost certainly" been tacked onto the NDAA. While some environmental groups stood by changes to the bill, which expanded some protections on old growth trees, Oregon Wild and the Oregon Chapter of Sierra Club opposed it. They say the broader O&C lands bill would have opened up more than 1 million acres of public land in western Oregon to clear-cut logging and weakened safeguards on clean water, salmon and wildlife.

Sen. Wyden took the floor last Friday and cited "a number of extraordinarily controversial provisions that will do serious and long-lasting environmental damage"

among his reasons for voting against the NDAA. He also noted, "in the crucial days, when decisions were being made about the public lands bills that did not make it into this package, most senators were kept in the dark about issues of great importance to their constituents."

Oregon Natural Desert Association director Brent Fenty says Congress's failure to attach a significant lands package to the NDAA is a real loss for the state. "Once again we're falling further behind our neighboring states in terms of the percentage of our public lands that we're permanently protecting for future generations," he says.

The largest deficit of protected lands in Oregon is among the state's deserts. Deserts cover nearly half the state, but out of Oregon's 47 protected areas, only three are located in desert areas.

Fenty says this is because when the Wilderness Act passed, the focus was mainly on forested areas in western Oregon.

"We have a lot of catching up to do in that regard. There are approximately 3 million acres of public land [in Oregon's high desert] that the Bureau of Land Management has acknowledged have wilderness values, but Congress has yet to give the vast majority of those areas the protection that they deserve. Until they do, we will have a significant wilderness deficit compared to neighboring states," says Fenty.

He says many of these sensitive areas are at risk of serious degradation from mining, energy development and off-road vehicle use.

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