

Oregon brewers unite for Owyhee

For decades, conservationists have been pushing for protection of the Owyhee Canyonlands in Southeastern Oregon. Now craft brewers have joined efforts to protect the largest swath of untouched and unprotected wilderness in the lower 48 states.

BY EMILY GREEN
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When President Barack Obama left the White House without declaring Oregon's Owyhee Canyonlands a national monument, he left the largest area of untouched wilderness in the lower 48 states unprotected.

It was a victory for cattle ranchers and the 90 percent of Malheur County voters who voted against long-running efforts to protect the 2.5 million acres of scenic desert and canyons the Owyhee River carved through southeastern Oregon.

But conservation groups fighting to protect the Owyhee for decades aren't giving up, and now they have the backing of a \$4.5 billion Oregon industry: Oregon craft beer.

On Feb. 1, a group of 28 Oregon breweries, including beverage giant Widmer Brothers Brewing, Bridgeport Brewing, Deschutes Brewery and many popular microbreweries, signed off on a letter to U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, asking them to protect the Owyhee Canyonlands.

The federally owned lands are under the management of U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

"We see the Owyhee Canyonlands as an opportunity to really protect something special," said Hopworks Urban Brewery marketing manager Eric Steen, "the same way that we see protecting the area around the Bull Run and forests in the Pacific Northwest as a really important thing because that in turn protects our clean water."

Hopworks was one of 17 Portland-based breweries to sign the letter, which pointed out that the brewing industry supports more than 30,000 jobs across the state.

"Our business is built on the bedrock of clean water and a healthy environment," the letter stated. "Protecting our watersheds and public lands is critical to keeping Oregon craft beer flowing."

Merkley and Wyden introduced a bill in Congress this past June that would have protected the federal lands from any new mines and blocked oil and gas drilling, but the bill failed to make it out of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry.

"I share the brewers' realization about the clear link between recreation and Oregon's world-renowned craft brews," Wyden said in response to the letter. "I also look forward to collaborating with the brewers and all those who work and recreate in the Owyhee on solutions that protect

this high desert while helping farmers and ranchers build on long-time local economic strengths."

Many ranchers fear grazing rights would be revoked if the lands are protected.

"There is a lot of misinformation and fear about what this proposal does and doesn't do," explained Owyhee Coalition Coordinator Corie Harlan. She said grazing is grandfathered in with a wilderness designation, so fears about losing those rights are unfounded.

The Owyhee Coalition consists of local and national groups including Harlan's employer, the Oregon Natural Desert Association, The Pew Charitable Trust, Sierra Club, American Rivers and others. To date, 85,000 people have signed petitions to protect Oregon's Owyhee.

The canyonlands are one of a kind. They are home to 29 plant species that don't exist anywhere else in the world, said Harlan. Additionally, one of the nation's largest herds of California bighorn sheep roam the area, along with Greater Sage Grouse, Rocky Mountain elk, mule deer and many other species. It's also one of the best places in the country for stargazing, given the absence of light pollution.

In September, Oregon's Department of Geology and Mineral Industries released a study that showed Malheur County, where the proposed monument is located, has rich supplies of precious metals, uranium, lithium and several industrial minerals including bentonite, used for kitty litter, making the economically depressed area ripe for mining.

It's unclear, however, just how feasible mining would be in some areas, given limited accessibility and rough terrain.

This study is "cause for concern," said Harlan. "This is a landscape that is going to be under even more pressure seemingly with this new administration, so the place is going to need even stronger defense."

There are several mining operations and active natural gas leases around the outer edges of the proposed wilderness area, and conservationists fear it's only a matter of time before operations move into the untouched areas to extract resources.

But natural resources aren't the only economic factor to consider. The area is a popular destination for hiking, fishing, hunting and rafting.

In 2016, Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association commissioned an independent third-party study to examine the economic contributions generated by outdoor recreation in the Owyhee region of Malheur County.

The research firm, Southwick and Associates, determined that outdoor recreation activities in the Owyhee wilderness contributes \$66.6 million and 729 full and part-time jobs to the Malheur County economy annually.

"Evidence suggests that visitation to a region can vary following a change in designation of public land," stated the study. "The designation, such as Conservation Area, may communicate or signal a caliber of natural resources and wildlife-related opportunities, thereby motivating potential users to visit the area."

Ross Putnam, head brewer at Portland's Base Camp Brewing Co., has been supportive of the effort to conserve the Owyhee since 2015.

He said he fell in love with the wilderness when he first visited the Owyhee Canyonlands in the autumn of 2015 with the idea of brewing a beer inspired by the area for his brewery's location series.

"I just found it to be a really special place," he said. The resulting beer was the Owyhee Canyonlands Wild Ale, still on tap at his Portland brew pub.

But Oregon craft breweries conservation efforts don't end with the Owyhee.

"One of the major pushes that we have right now," said Putnam, "is the Oregon Brewshed Alliance."

Oregon Wild convened the Oregon Brewshed Alliance in April of 2015, and since then it's raised about \$25,000 towards the nonprofit's conservation efforts. The alliance is focused on maintaining healthy watersheds throughout the state.

"Not only does it give us a network of businesses that we can reach out to," said Oregon Wild spokesperson Arran Robertson, "but they help connect us with audiences we might not otherwise reach. They host events and fundraisers for us, and we work with their staff and customers to make the connection between clean water and protected public lands."

The Oregon Brewshed Alliance has 34 partners, including McMenamins, Ninkasi, Portland Brewing and pFriem.

Putnam said there are other environmental initiatives among local brewers, including an increased focus on raw ingredients, specifically with the introduction of a Salmon-Safe label for hops grown in ways that are consistent with watershed health.

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The Owyhee Canyonlands are 2.5 million acres of untouched wilderness in Southeastern Oregon.

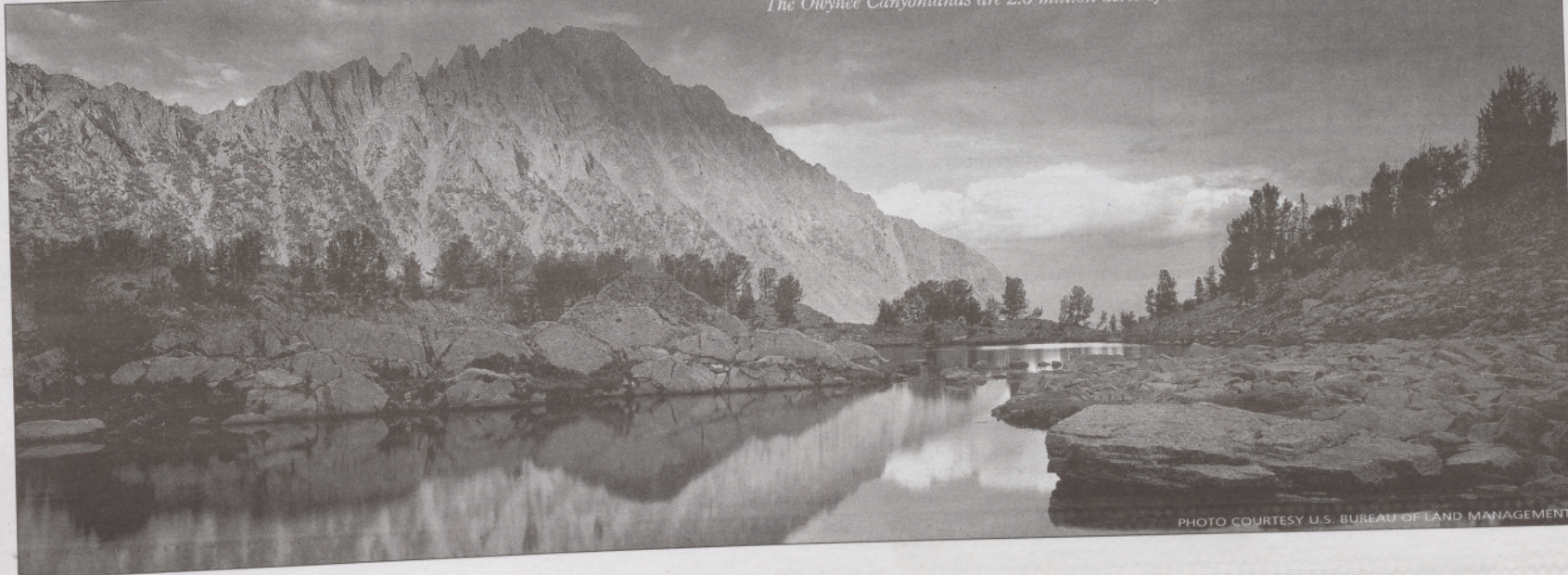


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