

Hells Canyon Preservation Council celebrates 50 years

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

It all started with a dam.

It would have been an immense structure, this dam, a concrete giant taller than any building in Oregon.

A dam to rival Hoover and Grand Coulee.

Except it was never built.

But even though the High Mountain Sheep dam never rose to block the Snake River in the deepest part of Hells Canyon, the very prospect of the 670-foot-high edifice had consequences that continue to affect northeastern Oregon half a century after the U.S. Supreme Court temporarily blocked the project.

Among those consequences was the creation of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council.

The conservation organization, which started in Idaho and later moved to Oregon, first to Wallowa County and then to its current headquarters in La Grande, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, coinciding with that landmark ruling by the nation's highest court.

The council also recognized the milestone with a name change that reflects the broader mission it has pursued for much of its history.

The new name — Greater Hells Canyon Council — acknowledges that the organization's focus extends beyond the canyon itself to encompass 4 million acres of public land in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, said Darilyn Parry-Brown, the council's executive director.

"We were the only group advocating for our public lands in this region at the time," Parry-Brown said, referring to the organization's founding in 1967.

Although the council's campaign to stop the High Mountain Sheep dam succeeded, in a more permanent way than the Supreme Court's decision, with the creation of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area on the last day of 1975, the council's efforts on behalf of the region's forests, grasslands and rivers, and the wildlife that depend on those ecosystems, has continued.

And new challenges — the effects of climate change on flora and fauna chief among them — have arisen.

"We don't have to fight a dam today in this region, and I'm grateful for that," Parry-Brown said. "But we definitely still have work to do."

The dam decision

Although the council is better known today for monitoring the federal government management of the Hells Canyon region's public lands, it was the possibility of that massive dam lodged in the heart of the canyon, creating a reservoir that would submerge several great rapids, that prompted a group of Eastern Idaho residents to form the organization in 1967.

Lois Barry and her husband, Jack, were among those founders.

Lois said the epiphany that led to the creation of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council started not with an actual visit to the canyon, but rather with a series of photographic slides taken during a rafting trip in the canyon.

"It was just a marvelous opportunity for concerned citizens to be aware of a magnificent place and to have a chance to help save it for everyone," said Lois, who retired as an English professor at Eastern Oregon University.

But Jack Barry and his buddies, who knew their way around a nucleus, were far less familiar with the courtroom, which is where Hells Canyon's future would be decided.

And that, Lois said, "is when Brock Evans showed up."

Evans was an attorney, which was important.

But he was also a young (then 29) and aggressive advocate for environmental causes, traits perhaps even more vital than his law degree.

Evans was the newly hired Northwest representative for the Sierra Club in 1967, the year he not only became involved in the High Mountain Sheep dam issue, but in fact saw Hells Canyon for the first time.

Idaho Power Company had already built two dams upriver from the deepest section of Hells Canyon — Brownlee and Oxbow — and the company's third and final dam in that reach, Hells Canyon, produced its first megawatts that same year.

But the debate changed significantly on June 5, 1967, when the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the Udall v. Federal Power Commission case.

In the 6-2 decision, authored by Justice William O. Douglas — who had traveled extensively in the Wallowa Mountains, just west of Hells Canyon, and who wrote with great fondness about the region — the High Court mandated that the Federal Power Commission consider not just who should build a dam, but whether it was in the public interest to build a dam at all.

Creating the Hells Canyon NRA

The council soon found a congressional ally in Bob Packwood, the Oregon Republican elected as U.S. senator in 1968.

Evans vividly remembers accompanying Packwood on a raft trip down the Snake in May 1970. The river, swollen with snowmelt, was running at nearly a record level.

The group was camped at Granite Creek, near one of the river's rowdiest rapids, when Packwood posed a question to his guides, all of whom, like Evans, were devout opponents to a dam and equally zealous about protecting the Hells Canyon country from clearcut logging and road building.

"He asked us, 'What do you guys really want out of this?'" Evans remembers.

In that era, long before cellphones and Google Maps, somebody pulled a basic highway map from a pack.



Ellen Morris Bishop for EO Media Group

Sunset at Tryon Creek Camp. The skies are one of the most spectacular aspects of a Hells Canyon raft trip.



Ellen Bishop for EO Media Group

From the top of Suicide Point, the terraces deposited by the Ice Age Bonneville Flood 17,400 years ago are apparent on both sides of the Snake River.

Evans grabbed a felt-tipped pen and drew the boundaries, generally speaking, of what would become the Hells Canyon NRA.

Two years later, in 1972, a judge granted a license to build a single high dam in Hells Canyon. But to Evans' great relief — and that of the council members — the license wouldn't take effect until 1976.

"It was a reprieve," Evans said. "It gave us a chance to get a bill passed. We had to seize the opportunity."

By 1973 Evans had moved to Washington, D.C., to run the Sierra Club's office in the nation's capital. But he continued to work on the NRA bill, relying heavily on the local expertise of the council and its president, Pete Henault.

"There's a tremendous amount of work that the organization did in publicizing Hells Canyon, to raise awareness of what a treasure and resource Hells Canyon is," said Brian Kelly, the council's current restoration director.

The lobbying effort was not immediately successful, but Congress eventually passed the bill, and on the final day of 1975 — the day before the dam license would have taken effect — President Gerald Ford signed the bill into law.

Lois and Jack Barry were by then well established in La Grande, where they raised their family.

And although the couple no longer played active roles in the council they had helped to establish, they remained — indeed Lois still remains — committed to its mission.

"We always kept in touch," Lois said.

The 1975 NRA Act prohibited not only the High Mountain Sheep dam but also a second proposed dam on the Snake to the north, near Asotin, Washington. The act set aside 652,000 acres of public land in Oregon and Idaho to be managed separately from the surrounding national forests — including almost 200,000 acres of wilderness (the Hells Canyon Wilderness was expanded to its current 217,000 acres in 1984).

The Hells Canyon Preservation Council's first major task was finished.

But in some ways its work was just beginning.

Managing the NRA and public lands

After 1975 the organization's focus shifted to making sure the U.S. Forest Service, which was given jurisdiction over the Hells Canyon NRA, wrote a management plan that reflected the principles behind the 1975 Act, Parry-Brown said.

But by then the council's interests had also expanded to public lands that are in some cases close to 100 miles from Hells Canyon itself. Most of this is national forest land, but it includes swaths of ground overseen by the Bureau of Land Management.

The council's wider view acknowledged both the complexity of the ecosystems and, more directly, the vital role that the greater Hells Canyon region plays as link between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin, said Kirsten Johnson, the council's current development director.

Designations such as the Hells Canyon NRA, Johnson said, are merely "lines drawn on a map for us humans."

But wild animals and sources of clean water and rare plants don't acknowledge such boundaries, she said.

"What happens outside the NRA also affects the NRA itself," Johnson said. "As the only conservation group in the area, obviously our mission grew."

Federal protection for anadromous fish affected land management in the Hells Canyon region in much the same way that the listing of the spotted owl did for public forests west of the Cascade Mountains, although not as dramatically.

One of those effects was the Forest Service's decision, in 1993, to stop cutting live trees larger than 21 inches in diameter in Eastern Oregon.

That policy, one of several protections known collectively as the "eastside screens," constituted a major victory in the council's campaign to curtail logging of old growth trees in the Hells Canyon region, Parry-Brown said.

Into the new century

During the 21st century the council has continued to advocate on behalf of the Hells Canyon region's flora and fauna, challenging the Forest Service to employ the latest science in managing public land, and urging the agency to consider how those lands can contribute things other than board-feet of timber or fodder for livestock.

One of the council's most versatile tools in this campaign is one that, unlike the eastside screens and federal protection for fish, has been available almost since the organization's birth.

It's the National Environmental Policy Act, better known as NEPA, and it became law in 1969.

NEPA requires federal agencies to study the potential environmental effects of their proposed actions. In the case of the Forest Service, that means writing environmental assessments or impact statements before selling timber or building roads, among other activities.

Equally important for conservation groups, the law requires agencies to solicit public comments for their proposals, and to respond to written objections. The council has submitted written comments on dozens of timber sales and other projects, the documents sometimes extending over many pages and citing multiple scientific studies.

"NEPA is an extremely valuable tool for groups like ours and any members of the public who want to engage in a public process," Parry-Brown said.

The council's aggressive use of NEPA provisions — and more so the occasional lawsuit it has filed to try to block a timber sale or other project — has not endeared the organization to some residents of the region.

As the most active conservation group in the area, the council has been blamed by some for playing a major role in the closures of several sawmills and the loss of associated timber industry jobs over the past quarter century.

Parry-Brown acknowledges this aspect of the council's reputation.

She points out that the council employs seven people, some of whom have lived in the region for all or most of their lives.

"We are definitely members of the community, and we want to see thriving communities as much as anyone else," she said.

Parry-Brown emphasizes that one of the council's main goals has always been to protect habitat for wildlife — including elk, deer and other big game species that are popular among local hunters.

"Hunters and anglers are the original conservationists," she said. "We often have far more in common than people realize."

Johnson, who hunts and fishes and grew up in the area, said she considers herself a true Eastern Oregonian.

"I have never felt a conflict between my Eastern Oregon roots and my conservation values," she said. "We're not anti this or that. We're pro for an ecologically thriving Hells Canyon region, and how can we make that happen."

Into the second half-century

Parry-Brown believes the Hells Canyon region will become even more important, as a haven for animals and plants, if the predicted effects of climate change come to pass.

Climate change is likely to force species to migrate to the north, she said, and Hells Canyon could serve both as a destination for those species and a link to other suitable habitats.

Parry-Brown believes that even if Jack Barry and the Happy Hikers had not been so captivated by Mager's slides of the wild Snake River in 1967 and been galvanized to transform their advocacy into an organization, another group, with similar goals, would have been formed.

"Because it is such a special area, and one deserving of a group like ours," she said. "I think about that often when I think about the work we do. I hope that the work we do today will ensure that it will remain such a special place."

For Lois Barry, who was there when it all started half a century ago, there is a sweet serendipity in the reality that she and her husband ended up in the same city as the Hells Canyon Preservation Council did.

Her donation to the council is still the first philanthropic checks she signs each year.

"We've always supported Hells Canyon Preservation Council because it means so much to our family and friends," Lois said.

Lois remembers the many meetings she and her husband hosted at their home, the celebratory gatherings, the toasts she shared with others when they looked at photos showing how high the defanged Snake's slack waters would have risen on the canyon walls had the dam been built.

"Fifty years later it's more important than ever to safeguard these wild and majestic places. Hells Canyon is one special and beautiful place where people can still get away from distractions and enjoy," she said.

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs

Tollgate, Ore.

CLOSED FOR SEASON

Anthony Lakes

North Powder, Ore.

Opens for season on Saturday, closed Christmas, open rest of week.

New snow: 9"

Base depth 30"

Conditions: Groomed runs in good shape, early season off-piste.

Ski Bluewood

Dayton, Wash.

OPENED FRIDAY

New snow: 2"

Base depth: 24"

Conditions: Powder, groomed runs

Ski Fergi

Joseph, Ore.

CLOSED