



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

The hillside behind Irwin Smutz's house is along the proposed route of the Boardman to Hemingway Transmission Line. The towers for the line would be more than twice the height of those already on the hill, according to the Stop B2H Coalition.

## B2H: Fighting for the land

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coalition \$12,000.

Fuji Kreider said the coalition now counts upwards of 500 individual members and multiple supporting organizations, including Oregon Rural Action, the Blue Mountain Alliance and Greater Hells Canyon Council.

Members span the gamut of backgrounds and ideologies. Coalition board member Irene Gilbert owns a gun shop, is a conservative and voted for Donald Trump for president. Fuji Kreider can't stand Trump and is a pacifist. Norm Cimon used to build computer networks and digs into data. Lois Barry taught English at Eastern Oregon University. Many are landowners who don't want the line to cross their property.

All the differences drop away, they said, to the singular end of stopping the power line.

"I think that's what makes us unique," Fuji Kreider said.

### Beyond their own backyards

From Idaho Power's early proposal to now, the effect that bothers Baker County opponents universally is how the power line towers, standing as tall as 180 feet, would affect iconic views of, and from, the Oregon Trail Interpretive Center on Flagstaff Hill, about 5 miles east of Baker City.

When Idaho Power proposed B2H in 2007, Deschner was living in the foothills of the Wallowa Mountains about 25 miles northeast of Baker City. He said an early proposed route would have put the power line within about 3 miles of his home.

"That's what really disturbed me," he said.

Idaho Power nixed that route, and Deschner since moved to Baker City, but his opposition to B2H expanded and solidified.

Deschner said he considers the current route, which would put the towers and suspended wires on the east side of Baker Valley, less than 2 miles from the interpretive center, a "slap in the face" to Baker County and to the role the interpretive center plays in the county's tourism industry. Since opening in May 1992, more than 2.3 million people have visited the center, which is owned and operated by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

Fuji Kreider said when the group formed, it would have been easy for opponents to dismiss their concerns as mere "NIMBY-ism" — not in my back yard-ism. Her husband, Jim Kreider, said negative effects on scenic views are only one deep concern.

"That's why we're not move B2H, we're stop B2H," he said.

Ryan Browne manages his family's land near Morgan Lake outside La Grande. They lease land to cattle ranchers, and Wednesday he stood on a slope covered in wild grass while a burly-looking black Angus eyed him from a low point next to the worn marker noting The Oregon Trail.

Over yonder, utility poles jut up 80 feet to hold 230-kilovolt lines. The poles make the tallest pines there look modest. The B2H poles would dwarf everything around. And the 300-foot right-of-way B2H requires will push close to this section of the historic trail. Browne said that's the problem.

"How do you mitigate for that?" he said. "Is this really a utility corridor?"

Browne ambled up the hill to another section of the trail

and pointed out how the narrow wooden wagons would have careened their way through this topography. He questioned why Idaho Power could get state and local approval to build so close.

"You're not seeing a million-dollar house here," he said. "You're not seeing structures. Clearly we protect it, too. For us, it's about preserving this history for future generations."

### Turning lights out on the environment

Land along Twin Lake near Morgan Lake has been in John Williams' family since 1956. Pines, firs, native grasses and flowers cover the land. Lily pads spread over Twin Lake, and Williams pointed to where eagles recently nested on the far side of the lake.

The big power line, he said, would go right through the area. Worse still, he said, the proposal calls for the lines to cross nearby Cowboy Ridge.

The feature is a wide clearing on a slow incline that Williams and others said is a prime elk calving site. The elk like the location, Williams said, because it also has several escape routes. Williams and other coalition members contend the B2H project carries the power to disrupt all of this ecosystem.

Brian Kelly said the wide easement the project calls for means clear-cutting. He is the restoration director of the Greater Hells Canyon Council and is an active coalition member. Forests sequester carbon, he said, and help reduce the effects of global warming. Cutting down swaths of trees at least as wide as a football field for mile after mile undoes that and harms animal ecosystems.

"We keep chopping up the landscape into smaller and smaller pieces, and it will have an effect," he said.

The anti-B2H crowd also contended the line threatens the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area about 7 miles south of La Grande in the southwest corner of the Grande Ronde Valley. Ladd Marsh spans 6,000 acres, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and is the largest hardstem bulrush wetland remaining in northeast Oregon. The marsh is home to dozens of species of wild-life, from mule and white-tailed deer to weasels and screech owls. The state fish and game department each spring hosts a festival for migratory bird viewing at the marsh.

The power line would transverse Irwin Smutz's land several hundred feet from the marsh. Power lines, petroleum lines, natural gas lines and fiber optics already cross his land, he said, and the first lines went in when he was a boy and his father made the deals. But Smutz said he does not want Idaho Power to build on his land.

The hillside behind his home is unsteady, he said, and each year creeps a little lower. As a geologist once told him, he said, that's what hills do. But, he said, he worries major construction for a massive power line would exacerbate the slippage.

Deschner in Baker City said he fears vehicles used in building B2H would spread noxious weeds across the farming and ranching land, and the line itself, once energized, would pose a wildfire threat.

Deschner and Marlette pointed to the 2018 fire that destroyed Par-

adise, California, and killed 85 people. Investigators determined earlier this year Pacific Gas and Electric Co. power lines sparked the blaze.

### New tech better than bigger lines

Norm Cimon of La Grande joined the chorus in opposing the line for what he called "gut-wrenching change to the utility industry."

The industry relies on a 100-year-old model for producing and delivering energy from the top down to customers, he explained, but a paradigm shift has customers producing power or not relying on corporations for power.

The New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission in January gave Liberty Utilities the OK to implement a pilot program to install 500 Tesla Powerwall 2 batteries behind the meter at customers' homes to achieve customer savings through peak load reductions. Vermont in May initiated a similar program. Cimon contended these are the forefront of what's to come.

"In 10 years, the changes in the industry will make the line obsolete," he said.

(The current schedule calls for construction potentially starting in 2022, and the line carrying power by 2026.)

He also asserted Idaho Power claims it is seeing growth that demands the company build the line while the company's own data reveals the average individual residential power use is dropping, from about 14,000 kilowatt hours per customer in 1997 to less than 12,000 in 2015.

And Marlette cited recent news reports showing Idaho Power's plans to increase its renewable energy portfolio, including a deal the company announced in March to purchase 120 megawatts of solar power from a company that plans to build a solar array south of Twin Falls, Idaho.

### The process favors the strong

Years ago, landscaper Kerry Tweit bought 53 acres outside La Grande for his dream home.

"I was looking for view properties with privacy, and that's what I got," he said.

He met land use demands from Union County for the self-cooling and self-heating house when the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife opposed where he wanted to build because it would disturb an animal corridor. He moved to one end of property.

"So I did that — got it rezoned," he said.

One day he got a tip someone was on his property. Tweit said it was a Bonneville Power Administration crew building a road. He said he gave them 5 minutes to pack up and get out or he would call the sheriff to arrest them.

Bonneville Power made him an offer, he said: \$75,000 for an easement. He took the deal.

But the check never came, he said. After three-and-half years, a hundred phone calls and the threat of legal action, he said he got \$25,000.

Now, Idaho Power shows up. He said the county knew about the power line before he did but did not tell him. Idaho Power let him know his dream house would be too close to the site for the power lines, he said. A company man told him there are two options — move the line or move his house.

"He joked and said it might be



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Members of the Stop B2H Coalition (from left to right) Ryan Browne, Jim Kreider, Fuji Kreider, Irene Gilbert and John Williams stand along the Oregon Trail. The proposed transmission line would pass just behind them.



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John Williams, a landowner who would face a direct impact if the proposed line passes through his property, discusses the concerns he has about the addition of service roads through his property.



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

Fuji Kreider speaks about the obsolescence that the line would face within the decade following its installation. Kreider believes that the line would be made obsolete by microgrid technology and renewable energy within the next decade or two.

cheaper to move my house," Tweit said.

Tweit is not laughing. "If they really want to do it, they're going to do it," he said.

Fuji Kreider said Tweit's story is all too common. The \$5 billion corporation has the resources to push through its project, and the process favors Goliath over David.

Irene Gilbert dubs herself the coalition's "legal analyst." She worked in the bureaucracy of Oregon Occupational Safety and Health, she said, and that prepared her for this.

"I guess you can call me a zealot if you like," she said, but someone has to read and glean the government and corporate speak in the thousands of pages documenting the B2H project. The amount of documents alone, she said, makes challenging Idaho Power a task too big for just one person.

Lois Barry, the retired university instructor, argued the state's energy facility siting process even disadvantages its own employees, and by extension, the people of Oregon. The corporation submits the application for a big project, she said, but the state lacks an independent body to provide key information.

"Who would they call if they have a question?" she asked. "They call Idaho Power."

Marlette said she has been disappointed in the lack of response to her requests for help from Oregon's congressional delegation and from Gov. Kate Brown.

"Nothing has been done," she said.

The process that started in 2007 has included meeting after meeting in five Eastern Oregon counties — Malheur, Baker, Union, Umatilla and Morrow. The most recent was in June, when the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council, the seven-member board that will decide whether to approve B2H, took public comment.

Deschner read a prepared statement at the June 19 hearing in Baker City, and said he will continue to attend meetings, but he also said he is skeptical his efforts, and the testimony and written objections from other opponents, will influence the council's decision. He described the approval process as a "kangaroo court."

"It's a really insidious process," he said.

Deschner and others said they believed from the start Idaho Power would get its way. The question was not whether the line would be built, but where and when.

"We were never given the choice — do we want it or not — and that disturbed me," he said.

Marlette also argued five counties in Eastern Oregon shouldn't be the roadway for a power line she believes won't benefit any of those counties and indeed will harm them.

"To run over five Eastern Oregon counties so (Idaho Power) can make a profit is sinful," she said.

### Staying in until the final bell

While opponents to the project consider the system rigged against them, they are not backing down.

"The people are coming to us now, and it's just growing by leaps and bounds," Fuji Kreider said, noting the coalition added 200 individuals to its rolls in the last month. And the city of La Grande in April passed a proclamation opposing the power line.

Deschner said he appreciated the efforts of Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett, who has been the three-member board of commissioner's liaison on B2H. He testified at the June 19 public hearing, saying, "Baker County's position from the get-go and continues to this day is that we do not support a line going through Baker County."

Although neither Marlette nor Deschner is confident their comments will persuade the Facility Siting Council to reject B2H, they said the support from Stop B2H Coalition and other opponents is gratifying.

"There's strength in numbers," Marlette said.

Browne said he believes the opponents have a shot, and banding together makes them tougher to push around.

Kreider at one point turned reflective when looking over Cowboy Ridge and envisioning what the line could do there.

"Some days," she said, "I feel more optimistic about our group's effect than others."

*Baker City Herald editor Jayson Jacoby contributed to this report.*