

‘People are frustrated’

Rural Oregonians who want to move border say they ‘no longer recognize’ their state

By **DOUGLAS PERRY**
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Thousands of people in Eastern and Southern Oregon want to leave the state — so long as they don’t have to pack up and go anywhere.

In May, five rural counties — Baker, Grant, Lake, Malheur and Sherman — voted to study moving the border so they would become part of neighboring Idaho. They joined Jefferson and Union counties, both of which voted in November to look into switching to the Gem State.

The reasons for this unlikely secession movement, laughed off by political observers a year ago but now being given grudging respect, are not as straightforward as they might appear at first glance.

Rural Oregonians, who tend to be politically conservative, unquestionably feel ill-treated by the state’s city dwellers, who skew to the political left and whose numbers now mean perennial Democratic majorities in the Oregon Legislature.

“The majority party constantly wants its ideals imposed on rural areas, and the people in those rural areas have had it,” former Oregon Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr. said. “They want to leave.”

Baertschiger, a Republican who is now a Josephine County commissioner, added:

“When I was in the Legislature, I was always jumping up and down about the urban-rural divide. It’s two very different lifestyles, two different ways of life.”

For those Oregonians looking to Republican-dominated Idaho as their ideological promised land, a famous saying from the late President Ronald Reagan resonates: “The

nine most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.’”

They believe less government regulation means more personal freedom. They say there should be greater economic opportunity and fewer handouts.

Democrats in the Legislature “have no idea the values we have out here, the work ethic,” said Sandie Gilson, who runs a title company in Grant County with her husband.

“We take care of ourselves and our neighbors,” she said. “I’ll always jump in to help someone whose house has burned down, but I’m reluctant to help people who won’t help themselves.”

The culture war that blares on cable news channels every night, and the extreme partisanship that feeds it, certainly plays a major role in the border-moving votes. It drives perceptions of the violence and vandalism that have accompanied Portland protests during the past year. It encourages political maneuverers like Baertschiger leading fellow Republican senators in fleeing Salem to derail ambitious Democratic legislative goals, such as a limit on greenhouse-gas emissions.

But the longing for Idaho among some Oregonians is also fueled by bigger-picture factors. There’s a nostalgia for the kind of rural life that’s gone for good or getting more precarious, thanks to the globalized high-tech economy, evolving mores and even persistent drought in the region.

Gilson, who grew up in Lake County and once worked in the timber industry, was a young single mother in the 1990s when federal protections for the spotted owl became a flashpoint in what already was a contentious fight over how



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin, File

La Pine resident Mike McCarter is leading the Move Oregon’s Border effort that aims to transfer rural Oregon counties to Idaho. Without this effort, he says, “We could get something like what happened in Burns a few years ago with Ammon Bundy. We don’t want the guns to come out. That’s not good for anybody.”

Oregon’s old-growth forests should be managed.

Since then, she said, “Oregon has changed into something we no longer recognize.”

Last year she knocked on doors to get the border-moving initiative on the ballot in Grant County.

“Idaho is more into using natural resources to enhance employment,” she said. “That’s what Oregon used to do.”

The goal of Move Oregon’s Border

Even with the success of the nonbinding votes so far — and with the ballot measure in the works for more counties — the possibility of any part of Oregon joining Idaho remains remote. The initiatives do no more than show voters’ resolve on the issue. A border adjustment would require the agreement of both state legislatures and ultimately Congress.

But Michael McCarter, a La Pine resident who launched the citizens’ group Move Oregon’s Border for a Greater Idaho, believes it’s a worthwhile undertaking regardless of what the final result ends up being.

“People are frustrated,” said the retired agricultural nurseryman, who’s the chief petitioner for the initiative drives. “If we can vent some of that pressure with people voting on this, that gives me a good feeling.

“I’m afraid that if we don’t have



Dave Killen/The Oregonian, File

Former Sen. Herman E. Baertschiger, a Republican, says “the majority party constantly wants its ideals imposed on rural areas.”

that vent, we could get something like what happened in Burns a few years ago with Ammon Bundy,” McCarter added, referring to when armed anti-government militants occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. “We don’t want the guns to come out. That’s not good for anybody.”

Not that he sees Move Oregon’s Border as merely a peaceful means of expressing dissatisfaction with an entrenched status quo. McCarter, an Air Force veteran and firearms trainer, believes a border adjustment can actually happen, if the political stars align. “It’s a long shot, but long shots come in,” he said.

Others involved in the effort have the same attitude, insisting that anything is possible if they

keep plugging away.

“Our goal is to send a message to Salem,” said Jackson County resident and Greater Idaho supporter David Reece. “But in the long run, if that doesn’t work, if nothing changes — and I don’t think it will — you have to be ready.”

Gilson, for her part, said she’d love to see the border-shifting movement make Salem more responsive to rural Oregon, though she’s not optimistic that will happen.

“Everything is always better when a compromise is made,” she said, adding that she remembers Oregon as a middle-of-the-road Republican state for years. “But there is no compromise in Oregon right now. There hasn’t been for a long time.”

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