

# Advocates ghostwrite commissioners' complaint about River Democracy Act

By ALEX BAUMHARDT  
Oregon Capital Chronicle

LA GRANDE — U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden in August got a letter critical of his plan to preserve more Oregon streams from 14 county commissioners in Eastern Oregon.

They represented the letter as their view — but gave no indication the piece had been produced by the timber advocacy group American Forest Resource Council.

Oregon Wild, an environmental organization based in Portland, traced the emergence of the letter through a public records request to the Union County Board of Commissioners and shared its findings with the Capital Chronicle.

The legislation called the River Democracy Act, proposed by Wyden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, would add 4,700 miles of Oregon streams and rivers to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

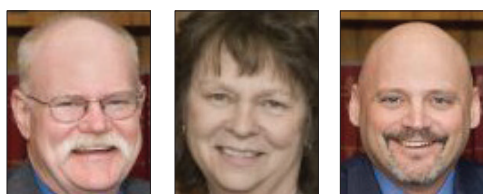
It also would, according to the American Forest Resource Council, take about 3 million acres of federal land out of use for cattle and logging industries.

Some Eastern Oregon interests have pushed back on the proposal, fearing it would impair ranching and forestry and pile on new federal regulations.



The Imnaha River flows through private lands 10 miles upstream from the town of Imnaha. The River Democracy Act of 2021, which Oregon U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley co-sponsored, would redesignate 58 miles of the river from Indian Crossing to Cow Creek, including this area, as a Recreational River, and label 4 miles of the river, from Cow Creek to the mouth of the confluence with the Snake River, as Scenic.

Wallowa County Chieftain, File



Anderes

Beverage

Scarfo

Among the records the group obtained was an email in August from Heath Heikkila, a government affairs officer at American Forest Resource Council and registered lobbyist, to Union County Commissioner Paul Anderes. Anderes doesn't work in the timber industry but comes from a timber family in Roseburg, according to the Union County Commission site. He has been a commissioner in Union County for about three years.

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on the legislation. I thought it might make sense to have it come from a group of commissioners."

Heikkila and nor Anderes didn't respond to emails or voice messages about the matter.

The American Forest Resource Council is a trade organization that lobbies for the timber industry out of Portland and in Washington, D.C. The group has a political action committee that contributes to both Republican and Democratic candidates at

the state and federal level, according to the nonprofit Open Secrets. Anderes has not received any contributions from the group, according to Open Secrets.

The draft letter Heikkila sent to Anderes on Aug. 24 was addressed to Wyden and posed questions ahead of a town hall he hosted later that month.

Within three days, Anderes and 13 other Eastern Oregon commissioners signed the letter and sent it via email, verbatim, to Wyden's office. The letter expressed concern that the River Democracy Act would create too many regulations for agencies to enforce and leave millions of fire-prone acres of forest untouched.

Anderes had earlier adopted language on the issue produced by the American Forest Resource Council. On Aug. 4, he and Union County Commissioners Matthew Scarfo and Donna Beverage issued a resolution opposing the River Democracy Act. Emails obtained by Oregon Wild showed the resolution was drafted by Nick Smith, public affairs director for the American Forest Resource Council, and emailed to Anderes about a month before the commission passed its resolution.

Smith told the Capital Chronicle the American

Forest Resource Council urges public officials to take up their causes, just like Oregon Wild.

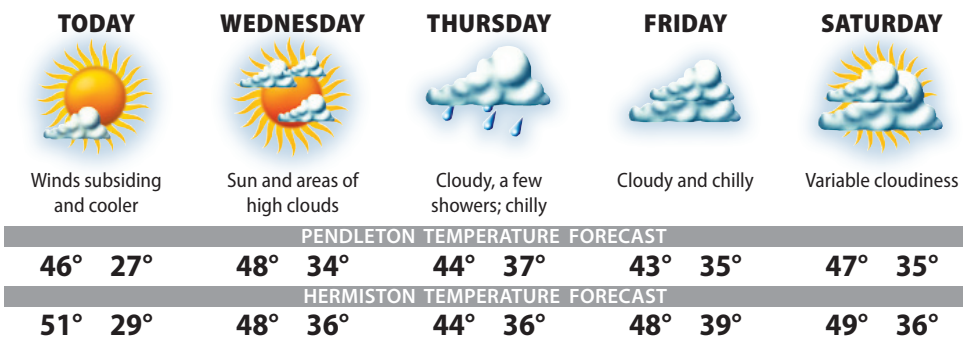
"We have serious concerns about this bill and its potential to worsen wildfires in Oregon," he said. "We encourage elected officials and organizations to take positions. If they're using that information, and it sounds like they did, then they have serious concerns about the bill and want to be heard."

Arran Roberts, communications manager at Oregon Wild, said, "We haven't had someone stick anything we've said on their letterhead and call it their own."

Erik Fernandez is wilderness program manager at Oregon Wild. He sought the public records from Union County after noticing similarities between press releases from the American Forest Resource Council and statements from several Eastern Oregon county commissioners.

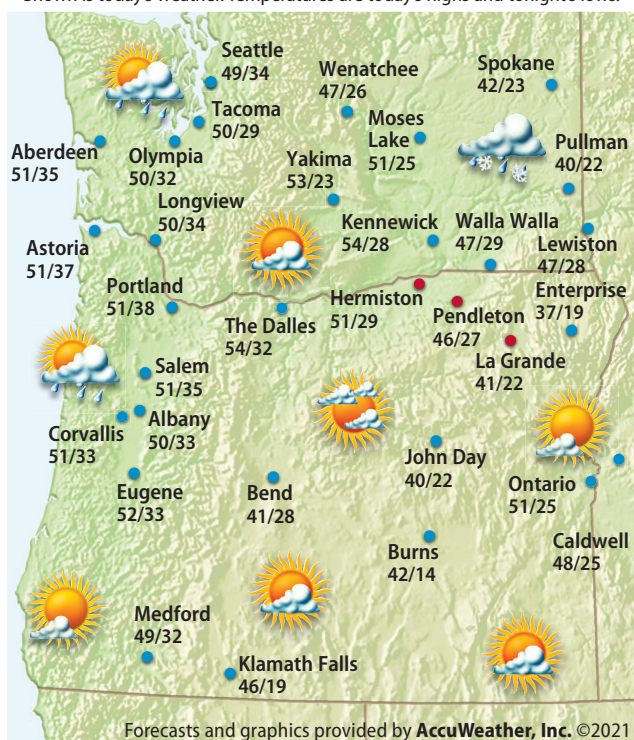
"The statements, the talking points, they were clearly all reading from the same script," he said. "These Eastern Oregon county commissioners are criticizing this bill for being written by Portland environmentalists. But here you have timber industry lobbyists based out of D.C. and Portland talking for them."

## Forecast for Pendleton Area



## OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



## ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	70°	45°
Normals	50°	33°
Records	71° (1896)	-6° (1955)

### PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace
Month to date	0.96"
Normal month to date	0.68"
Year to date	6.99"
Last year to date	12.08"
Normal year to date	11.00"

### HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	68°	45°
Normals	51°	32°
Records	72° (1995)	-12° (1955)

### PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	Trace
Month to date	0.86"
Normal month to date	0.53"
Year to date	4.78"
Last year to date	3.82"
Normal year to date	7.00"

### WINDS (in mph)

Today	Wed.
Boardman WSW 8-16	NE 6-12
Pendleton WSW 10-20	E 6-12

### SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	6:56 a.m.
Sunset tonight	4:23 p.m.
Moonrise today	3:27 p.m.
Moonset today	4:04 a.m.

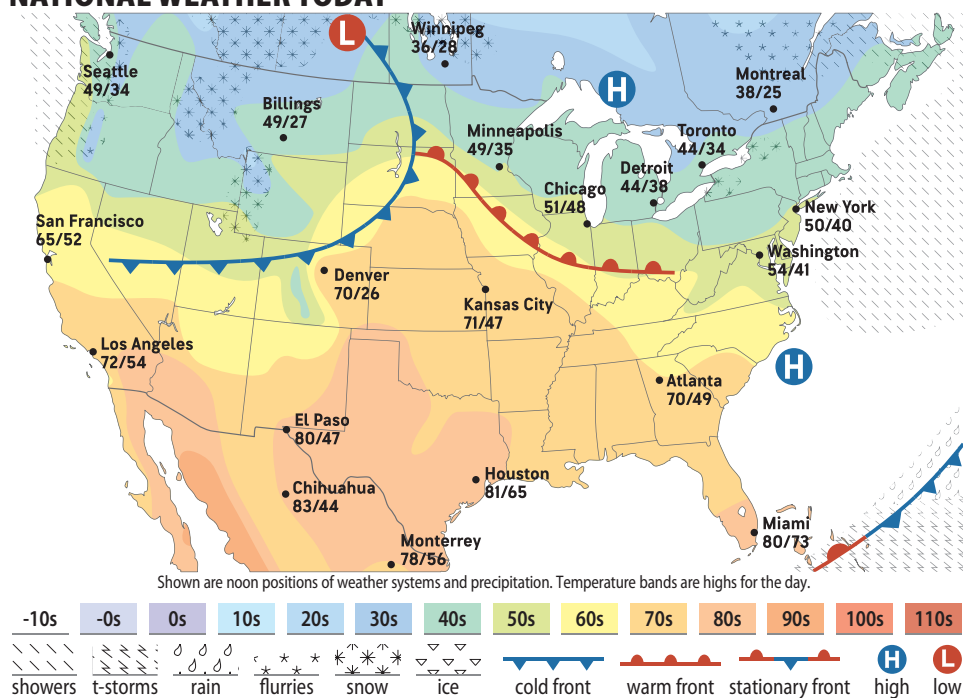


## NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 91° in San Bernardino, Calif. Low 0° in Celina, Minn.

## NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



## Trail-with-rails gets \$272K in grants

By BILL BRADSHAW  
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The Joseph Branch Trail Consortium, the nonprofit working to establish a 63-mile trail-with-rails between Elgin and Joseph in northeast Oregon, announced Tuesday, Nov. 9, it has received two grants totaling more than \$272,000 that will fund construction of the first trailhead and inaugural trail segment, as well as final planning and design for another 13-mile segment.

The trail has been in the planning stages for about 10 years and will eventually offer a nonmotorized alternative transportation route to Highway 82 in the form of a trail that will run beside existing railroad tracks in the railroad right-of-way owned by the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority. With one end in Elgin, the other will terminate 63 miles later in Joseph.

City officials at each end of the proposed trail are eager to see it accomplished, anticipating economic and health benefits. Elgin, at 1,700 population, has no accessible trails from downtown, according to a press release announcing the grants. Joseph, with roughly 1,000 people, also will benefit from the trail.

As it turns out, Brock Eckstein has an official interest at each end. He's Elgin's city administrator and also is interim city administrator for Joseph.

"Our city staff, collaborating closely with the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium and WURA, are prepared to lead and assist as needed to ensure the project is a success, because the potential economic and health impacts from this trail for our city, community, and region will be momentous," said Eckstein of the benefits to Elgin.

"In the future, it'll be really great for Joseph," he added, lamenting the delays in the project over acquiring funding.

A board member of the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority, which owns the right-of-way alongside the tracks, Eckstein sees the grants as a step forward in solving the financial woes of the project.

"I'm really excited getting two grants," he said.

One grant, from Oregon State Parks' Recreational Trails Program, will fund construction of the trailhead, which also will serve as a pocket park for the city of Elgin. The trailhead/pocket park will be on a parcel of city-

owned land directly across from the train depot in downtown Elgin.

Eckstein said there is a "time cap" of December 2024 to get the first 13 miles done.

"We're just taking it piece by piece until we get the whole thing done," he said.

In addition to trail information, the trailhead/pocket park will include an electric vehicle and e-bike charging station (the only one between La Grande and Enterprise), an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant parking place and an interpretive signage about the area's earliest inhabitants and more-recent history.

The Oregon State Parks grant also will fund construction of the inaugural 0.6 mile of the trail that will be an ADA-compliant path running out of town along the railroad tracks.

A second grant, from the Oregon Department of Transportation's Transportation Growth Management program, will fund development of a detailed refinement plan for the 13-mile segment of the trail between Elgin and Lookingglass in rural Union County on the Grande Ronde River near Palmer Junction. This funding also will support local outreach and education about the trail.

## IN BRIEF

### Man kneeling on train tracks hit, killed

BAKER CITY — A 30-year-old Baker City man was hit and killed by a freight train Sunday evening, Nov. 14, in what police said appeared to be an intentional act by the man.

Michael Steven Myers-Gabiola died at the scene.

The 200-car freight train, which was traveling at about 40 mph, hit Myers-Gabiola at about 5:29 p.m., said Sgt. Wayne Chastain of the Baker City Police Department.

Chastain said police don't believe the incident was either accidental or a result of foul play.

He said Myers-Gabiola, based on what the

train crew saw, was kneeling on the tracks near a trestle across the Powder River south-east of Wade Williams Park.

Chastain said the train was rounding a corner when the crew saw something on the tracks.

When the crew realized it was a person, they initiated an emergency stop procedure, but the train had no chance to stop in time to enough to avoid hitting Myers-Gabiola.

None of the train crew was hurt, said Robynn Tysver, a spokesperson for Union Pacific Railroad.

The train was stopped for about three hours before being allowed to resume its trip, Chastain said.

—EO Media Group

**CORRECTIONS:** The East Oregonian works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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