

# Dozens of Oregon groups sign letter supporting River Democracy Act

By MICHAEL KOHN  
The Bulletin

BEND — A plan to protect thousands of miles of rivers and streams in Oregon received renewed attention last week when dozens of organizations banded together to encourage politicians to speed up the passage of the bill.

Seventy-five organizations across the state sent a joint letter to Oregon Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley urging them to pass the River Democracy Act. The letter is signed mainly by conservation groups and outdoor sporting and fishing organizations.

If passed, the bill would add nearly 4,700 miles of rivers and streams in Oregon to the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The federal designation, created in 1968, protects rivers and develops them for tourism, just as national parks and national forests protect designated areas of land. Rivers can be listed as having wild,

scenic or recreational value.

Wyden and Merkley introduced the River Democracy Act, Senate Bill 192, in February 2021. More than 15,000 streams and rivers were nominated by Oregonians for inclusion in the act after Wyden called on state residents to suggest their favorite waterways in 2019. In Bend, one nomination came from a group of sixth-graders at Pacific Crest Middle School.

But the bill has its detractors too. In January, U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, spoke out against the act on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, declaring that it will create a wildfire risk in Oregon's watersheds. Bentz argued that the act puts forests at risk because it allows prescribed burns without conducting thinning operations.

The American Forest Resources Council, which represents logging interests, is among the groups that defend Bentz's position.

"We continue to oppose the River Democracy Act



Mark Morical/Bulletin file

**Tumalo Creek flows west of Bend in this 2021 photo. The River Democracy Act in Congress would add nearly 4,700 miles of designated wild and scenic rivers across Oregon. It also calls for widening protective stream buffers from a quarter-mile to a half-mile on both sides.**

because it will increase the risk of severe wildfires, threaten our communities, impede public access and impact multiple uses of public lands," said Nick Smith, the council's public affairs director. "Catastrophic wildfires including subsequent erosion and sedimentation

pose the greatest threat to watersheds and rivers and water quantity and quality."

Smith said more management of federal lands will help reduce wildfire.

"Rather than imposing more arbitrary designations and restrictions on federal lands, Oregon's federal rep-

resentatives should focus on giving public lands managers more resources and tools to proactively reduce wildfire risks, maintain access and protect our forests, rivers, and communities," said Smith.

Wyden's office has pushed back against the argument that forests will be at a greater risk for fire, stating that the bill requires agencies to implement a fire risk-reduction plan across a half-mile corridor on either side of a river or stream.

The letter sent last week was supported by riverkeeper groups, guiding associations, watershed councils and paddling clubs, among others.

"Although our groups represent a wide variety of interests, purposes, and people across the state, we all have at least one thing in common — a love of Oregon's rivers," stated a portion of the letter. "They provide us with clean drinking water, our favorite swimming holes and places to take our families fishing and boating."

The designations would add protection for fish, wildlife, clean drinking water and recreation in watersheds including the Deschutes, Metolius, McKenzie and others.

The next step for the act is a vote by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which is chaired by West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a Democrat.

Wyden told The Bulletin that public lands bills tend to get a close look at the end of the year, and he is preparing to have it voted on in the Senate by that time. His office is in communication with Manchin specifically to seek the necessary votes to get the bill passed.

"In terms of public lands, we're going to fairly soon have some mark-ups, where the legislation is formally considered and pulling out all the stops for it," said Wyden. "We are getting all the small businesses from rural Oregon behind it and we are pleased about the coalition coming together."

# Firearms training, magazine capacity measure qualifies for statewide vote

By PETER WONG  
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon voters will decide Nov. 8 whether to require firearms training and ban high-capacity ammunition magazines.

The Oregon Elections Division said a ballot initiative to do so has qualified for the general election. The state validated 131,671 of the 160,498 petition signatures (82%) submitted by sponsors. The number was more than the 112,020 required, based on 6% of the votes cast for governor in the 2018 election, a standard fixed by the Oregon Constitution.

Voters will see a total of four measures on the general election ballot, two initiatives that qualified by peti-

tion and two constitutional amendments referred by the Legislature.

This measure would limit ammunition magazines to 10 rounds each. In addition to the limit, the measure would require people to undergo classroom and live-fire training before they obtain a firearms permit and complete background checks. (Current law allows a purchaser to obtain a gun even if the check is incomplete after three days; the measure would compel the check to be completed.)

Lift Every Voice Oregon, the movement that sponsored it and a second potential measure, was way behind at the end of May when an initial round of 2,500 signatures was submitted.

But two mass shootings outside Oregon resulted in a surge of petition volunteers and signatures before the July 8 deadline.

Ten Black people were shot dead May 14 in a supermarket in Buffalo, and 19 children and two teachers died 10 days later at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas.

The Rev. Dr. W.J. Mark Knutson, pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, said those events helped produced more than 1,000 new volunteers and 150,000 more signatures.

"People were saying they could not sit anymore, so we had 1,000 new volunteers come forward to join the 500," Knutson said in an interview earlier in July. "A

lot were parents with children — it was pretty amazing. They are learning about democracy.

"The process is as important as the result — democratic action by the people. In this nation right now, we need to see democracy at work."

Movement leaders shelved a second ballot measure that would have banned some assault weapons. Knutson said leaders hope to present it as a bill to the 2023 Legislature, which opens Jan. 9.

The measure joins three others on the general election ballot.

The other initiative, which has already qualified, would bar lawmakers from seeking re-election if they have 10 or more absences not excused

by the House speaker or Senate president. That initiative was put forth by public employee unions and others in response to walkouts by Republican legislative minorities in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

The measure would change the Oregon Constitution, which requires two-thirds of lawmakers — 40 of 60 in the House, 20 of 30 in the Senate — to be present for the chambers to conduct business. Most legislative chambers, and the U.S. Congress, require a simple majority of members.

Oregon's 2020 walkouts forced the majority Democrats to scuttle proposed climate-change legislation and shut down the short session. (Republican senators walked

out for one day in 2021; Republicans in the House were deterred from doing so by a 2021 rule that set a maximum daily fine of \$500 for an unexcused absence.)

The other measures, both constitutional amendments, were referred by the 2021 Legislature. One would define health care as a right; the other would remove slavery as a punishment for crime.

The Elections Division will assign numbers to all four measures. They will be accompanied by explanatory statements and fiscal analyses — those are done by panels — plus advocacy statements submitted and paid for by supporters and opponents. The Legislature writes statements for its own referrals.