

Putting up a fight

Stop B2H Coalition remains charged up to defeat massive power line project

By Phil Wright
East Oregonian

LA GRANDE — JoAnn Marlette has been working to stop Idaho Power's proposed power line through Eastern Oregon for so long, her campaign wardrobe contains not one but two T-shirt designs.



JoAnn Marlette

Marlette marched to a closet in her downtown Baker City apartment and returned clutching a pair of shirts. A gray garment bears the motto "Move Idaho Power."

The second, and newer, shirt, in a much more conspicuous yellow with black lettering and graphics, is the work of the grassroots, non-profit group Stop B2H Coalition based in Union County, Baker County's neighbor to the north.

The moniker refers to Boardman-to-Hemingway, the 500-kilovolt, 300-mile transmission line Idaho Power, the Boise-based investor-owned utility, proposed in 2007. In the dozen years since, Marlette, 76, and the man sitting beside her, Whit Deschner, 65, also of Baker City, attended many meetings and pored over thousands of pages of documents related to the project. They don't want the line.

"I just think it's an erosion of our community standards," Deschner said. "We have it made here now."

Powering up

Jim and Fuji Kreider of La Grande have the same take. They serve on the Stop B2H Coalition's board of directors. They left their La Grande home and careers to help rebuild communities in countries such as Kosovo and returned after eight years to find their own community in conflict because of the power line project.

"What's this company doing destroying our community, our cohesion?" she said.

The Kreiders took note, attended meetings and saw others speaking against the line.

"The longer it was going on, the more people were concerned about it," Fuji Kreider said.

They and others joined

forces in 2015 to launch Stop B2H. The group became a nonprofit in 2017, and that fall received its first grant to support the fight. The Oregon-California Trails Association gave the coalition \$12,000.

Fuji Kreider said the coalition now counts upward 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 Krieder 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 Krieder 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



Photo By Ben Lonergan /The East Oregonian

The Kreiders, Jim, left, and Fuji, view the landscape with John Williams near Morgan Lake above La Grande where the proposed line would travel. In addition to the line itself, the B2H Coalition has concerns about the destruction of land for the creation of access roads and Idaho Power's ability to control weed growth following the clear cut.

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

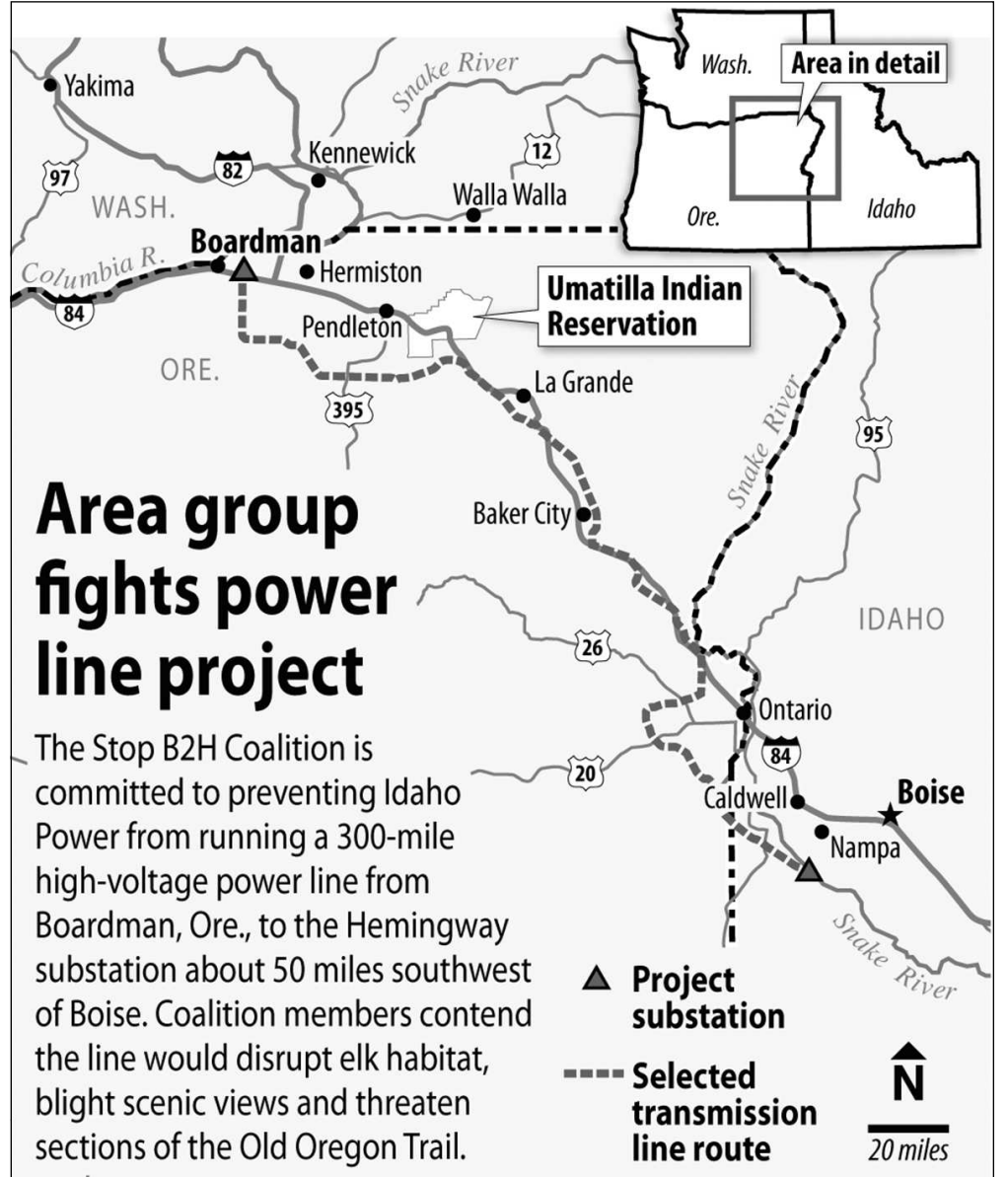
"That's why we're not move B2H, we're stop B2H," he said.

Ryan Browne manages his family's land near Morgan Lake outside La Grande. They lease land to cattle ranchers, and recently 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.



Source: Bureau of Land Management

Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group

"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 North-eastern Oregon. The marsh is home to dozens of species of wildlife, 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.



Irvin Smutz

The power line would transverse Irvin 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 Paradise, 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."



Photo By Ben Lonergan /The East Oregonian

Ryan Browne discusses his concerns about the project's close proximity to heritage sites such as the Oregon Trail. He is also concerned about the visual impact that the transmission line would have on properties such as his as well as the Grande Ronde Valley.



Photo By Ben Lonergan /The East Oregonian

An Oregon Trail marker sits within the path of the proposed project. According to the Stop B2H Coalition, the proposed line would cross the Oregon Trail eight times.