



Dave Killen/The Oregonian

A tractor moves across a mostly dry field in Klamath Falls. Drought has caused tensions over water policy.

Border

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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 maneuvers 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 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 non-binding 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."

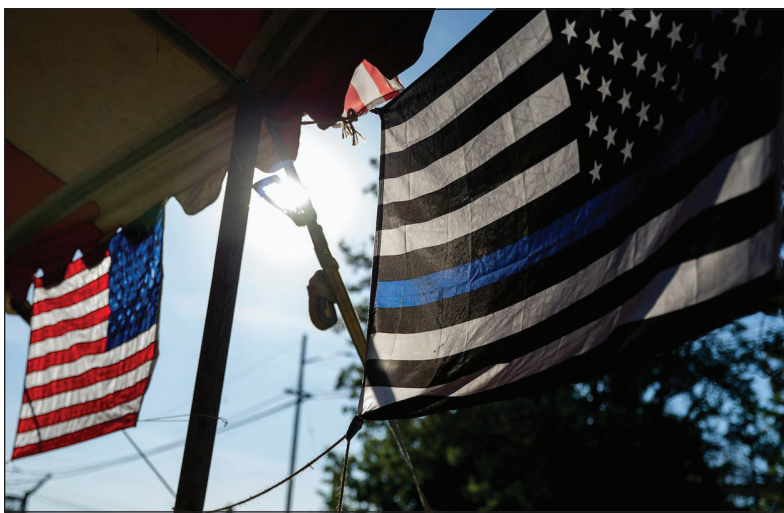
"I'm afraid that if we don't have that vent, we could get something like what happened in Burns a few years ago with Ammon Bundy," McCarter added, referring to when armed anti-government militants occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. "We don't want the guns to come out. That's not good for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



Dave Killen/The Oregonian

Flags fly in Southern Oregon. On the left is an American flag, on the right a modified version showing the "thin blue line," which commonly symbolizes police officers or general support for law enforcement. Many Oregonians who support adjusting the border with Idaho hope the long-shot effort will cause the Democratic-led Oregon Legislature to pay closer attention to their concerns.



AP file

A northern spotted owl flies after an elusive mouse jumping off the end of a stick in the Deschutes National Forest near Camp Sherman in 2003. For some, the fight over protecting the owl's habitat became a flashpoint in Oregon's rural-urban divide.

ral 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."

'The internet has made it possible'

Charles Jones loves the way of life in La Grande, the county seat of Union County. The retired science teacher and Navy commander, a fourth-generation Eastern Oregonian, hikes and camps and hunts. He wouldn't want to live anywhere other than "this spectacular mountain valley," he said.

He also says he's liberal — at least more liberal than a majority of his fellow Union County residents. He believes the push for a Greater Idaho comes from people spending more and more time staring at their screens, where talking heads and Facebook posts gin up anger over issues that are rarely germane to people's day-to-day lives.

"Like most crazy movements, the internet has made it possible," he said.

Most of the people who have voted to change the border haven't thought it through, he added. "It's just a 'Screw Portland' reaction."

There are some significant negatives to consider when weighing the proposal to shift up to 22 of Oregon's 36 counties into Idaho, Jones wrote last month in a guest editorial for the Observer newspaper in La Grande.

Would Idaho spend billions of dollars to buy Oregon's state prisons and other state-owned property in Eastern and Southern Oregon? Would it take over bond payments for projects in those counties? Have

Oregonians on the present border thought about how much business they'd lose from Idahoans who come across the state line to shop without having to pay sales tax?

Plus, there's recreational marijuana, a meaningful revenue generator in some rural Oregon areas — and still illegal in Idaho. And the minimum wage in Idaho is barely more than half what it is in Oregon (\$7.25 in Idaho, compared to \$12 in non-urban Oregon counties).

This much also is indisputable: Sparsely populated rural Oregon has a much lower average income than the Portland metro region, which has the bulk of the state's residents. Eastern and southern Oregon depend on tax revenue that comes from the part of the state it wants to leave.

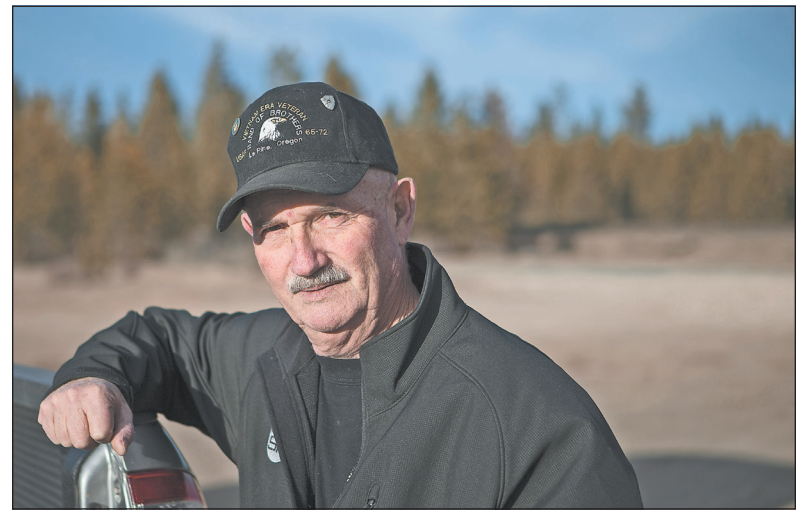
"We have a lot of nice highways and other (infrastructure and services) out here," Jones pointed out. "We don't pay for them ourselves."

But Greater Idaho proponents don't believe that tax revenue coming their way from the northwestern hinterland is the issue. They recognize that Idaho wouldn't subsidize rural Oregon counties as much as urban Oregon does now, and they're fine with that.

"State government should be very minimal," Reece said. "It should not be involved in local policy." He decried "mandates from Portland that are contrary to our values," referring to "hot-button culture issues."

A changing culture

Those hot-button cultural issues — the debate over, say, whether America is a racist country today or how schools should address gender identity — lead to raised voices here and there in rural Oregon, just as they do in Portland and Eugene. But down deeper, the propel-



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."



Maps courtesy of the Move Oregon's Border campaign

A zoomed-in map provided by the group Move Oregon's Border shows Bend remaining in Oregon but La Pine becoming part of Idaho.

lant for this secession movement comes from the fear that a uniquely American approach to life is slipping away. That rugged individualism, the foundational mythology of the winning of the West, is under relentless attack.

And expansive government, many rural Oregonians have decided, is more to blame than anything else.

Out in the Oregon backcountry, said Baertschiger, "they don't want streetlights. They want it to be dark. They have a 'we'll-take-care-of-ourselves' attitude. They don't want government involved in their lives."

(In the small Josephine County town of Cave Junction, they've long showed they're willing to walk that walk. Over the years, voters there have rejected attempts to fund law enforcement, and so there is no police department. Instead, residents formed a volunteer "citizen watch group" to help patrol the town.)

Baertschiger, though he works in government, said he tends to be of that take-care-of-ourselves mindset himself — and so he's "entertaining" the Move Oregon's Border proposal.

"There would be logistical issues to answer for a long time, but you've got to get past the political hurdles, then the logistical issues can be figured out," he said. "There's always a way to figure those things out."

Of course, not everyone in rural Oregon worries about the arrival of government men who say they're here to help.

Flipping Oregon counties into Idaho, Jones said, would only create new enclaves seeking dramatic political change. Americans across the country are increasingly self-segregating by political viewpoint, but there isn't any place that's a true ideological monolith. Jones' Union County, for example, went strong for President Donald Trump in November, 68% to 28%. But in La Grande, the county's largest city with some 13,000 people, it was a close race between Trump and Joe Biden.

"All the commissioners (in Union County) are conservative," Jones pointed out. "The more liberal residents have to live with that. Are we going to secede from Union County because it's too conservative? You can fragment so you have city blocks seceding. Where does it end?"

Baertschiger, who left the Oregon Senate in January, also acknowledges that the urban-rural divide isn't just between the Portland metro area and the state's great open lands. "There's a difference here in Josephine County between

people who live in Grants Pass and people who live outside it," he said. "In Grants Pass, they want more fire protection, more police, streetlights. And they're willing to pay for those services."

What do Idahoans want?

In the midst of this debate over the viability of changing the border, what sometimes gets overlooked is what Idahoans think about it.

There hasn't been any real polling on the subject, but some elected officials there have expressed support. When Facebook mysteriously disabled the Move Oregon's Border page early this year, Idaho state Rep. Ronald Nate joined McCarter in sending a letter to the social-media giant seeking the page's restoration.

The letter noted that Idaho Gov. Brad Little had said in a Fox News interview that he understood and welcomed the border-change effort, and that the "President of the Idaho Senate, Chuck Winder, and the Speaker of the Idaho House, Scott Bedke, have expressed some support for the idea."

Baertschiger said the Move Oregon's Border proposal offered obvious perks not only for the targeted rural counties in Eastern and Southern Oregon but also for the Gem State.

"Look at it from Idaho's perspective," he said. "It would have a deep-water port (in Coos Bay). That would be pretty advantageous for Idaho."

McCarter is confident both Idaho and rural Oregon would benefit from the border-adjustment plan he's pushed for the past couple of years, but he says he remains "open to other solutions" as well.

"I've heard a lot of people's opinions on this subject, some negative, and that's fine," McCarter said. "I'm thankful, because that opens the conversation."

Jones agrees that more conversation is the answer. He believes that if rural Oregonians upset about liberal state government stepped away from their screens more often and reminded themselves of all the things that are right in their world, then maybe those positives would make them realize they can coexist just fine with Portland.

"I'm a liberal person in a conservative county, and it's no problem," he said. "Great people here. If you're on a dark road and your car breaks down, there's no better place to be. People here want to help you. They're problem-solvers. I think we can work out our differences with the rest of the state if we put our minds to it."