

Malheur County fights massive wilderness designation

By Sean Ellis

Blue Mountain Eagle and Capital Press

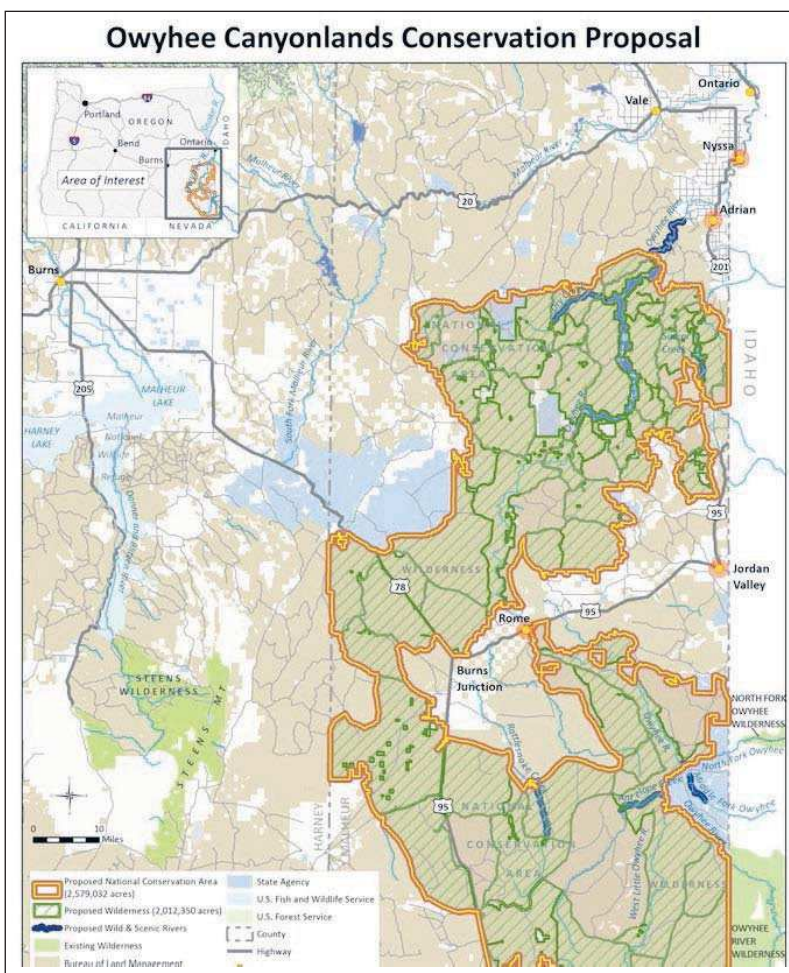
Grant County commissioners have added their letter – along with State Representative Greg Walden and county courts from 13 other Oregon counties – protesting the move by the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA) to carve off 2.5 million acres of Malheur County as a wilderness area. That area, Walden said, is “larger than the states of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.”

The county encompasses 6.5 million acres.

The Owyhee Canyonlands Conservation Proposal would set aside both lands and hundreds of miles of wild and scenic rivers in a county that already has 4.5 million acres (73 percent of the land in the county) under federal management.

Grant County Commissioners plan to attend a town hall meeting Thursday at the Adrian High School gym. The commissioners are looking to pass a resolution later if needed.

Malheur County Soil and Water Conservation District Manager Linda Rowe, who opposes the monument proposal, said that 2.5 million acres would equal 43 percent of the county. Once federal lands are converted to special use lands, such as National Monument, Wilderness Area, Na-



tional Conservation Area, they permanently lose multiple-use provisions – including grazing rights.

Malheur County is Oregon’s No. 1 cattle producing county. Ac-

ording to Oregon State University, agriculture generates over \$370 million annually in the county, of which \$134 million comes from cattle.

According to Sergio Arispe, a

livestock and rangeland agent at Oregon State University’s Malheur County Extension office, locking up that much land would eliminate about 33 percent of the county’s total grazing land.

If the county’s economically vital cattle industry was devastated by such a conversion, a lot of hay, corn and other grains wouldn’t be grown here (either), Rowe said.

Malheur County Cattlemen’s Association President Chris Christensen was blunt: a monument designation “would destroy the community and the business of agriculture as it’s being done in this area right now,” Christensen said. “If this thing comes to pass, it would have a devastating effect on the ranching community and agriculture in Malheur County. Anybody involved in agriculture in Malheur County isn’t going to be in favor of this thing.”

Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA), which is leading the monument effort, says the proposal would “allow working farms and ranches to continue to operate.”

But Jordan Valley rancher Bob Skinner, former president of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said area residents believe the opposite would happen.

“There are cattle everywhere out there,” Skinner said. “If you take cattle out of (this) economy,

you have decimated the economy. It would change our way of life. Not only farmers and ranchers, but everybody around here is up in arms about it.”

ONDA and other regional and national conservation groups and businesses are gathering signatures to back their effort. According to ONDA’s web site, “a variety of legislative and administrative options (are) being considered to permanently protect this place.”

According to a news release from Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, it is anticipated the groups are planning to ask President Barack Obama to use his power under the Antiquities Act to designate the land as a national monument, wilderness area or national conservation area.

Wallowa County Commissioners unanimously approved resolution in opposition to the proposal in September, joining Lake, Marion, Grant, Lincoln, Wheeler, Columbia, Harney, Deschutes, Tillamook, Baker, Union, Linn and Yamhill counties in opposition.

The Malheur County Court had already spent two years developing an alternative Wilderness Area in the southern part of Malheur County consisting of 45,414 acres. Affected ranchers and the Malheur County Court endorsed that proposal.

DAM

Continued from Page A1

out, and they have actually seen it protect the community in past flood events. The dam, built in the 1960s, has also provided a scenic recreational area.

“The dam has been there for 52 years,” said Gregg Haberly of John Day. “If it was built on such unstable ground it would have washed out a long time ago.”

The Grant County Court proposed leasing the dam from the state for one year to determine if it can be repaired or if it needs to be removed.

“It’s our resource. It’s our playground,” County Commissioner Boyd Britton said. “Even though it’s on your property, we consider it ours and we don’t want to lose that precious commodity.”

The county also suggested sending its engineer Doug Ferguson to examine the site before the state makes its final decision.

Ferguson stated he didn’t have enough time or post-fire information to determine if the state was right or wrong to take down the dam.

Canyon City resident Jesse Madden asked if the court could file an in-

junction. Rep. Cliff Bentz (R-Ontario) said anyone could, but would require a bond to accept liability for all potential loss, life and property.

The state officials were open to working with the county, but said time is running short to get work done before this winter.

“The state’s decision was made to move forward with the removal, but we want to work with the county on conversations we are having on the front of new impoundment opportunities and strong feelings about this particular one,” Brownscombe said.

Unable to convince the state to stop its plans, the county court changed the discussion to have a new dam built on the creek. The county asked for a commitment from the state to assure a new dam is built.

“I don’t think there is anyone here saying that is not an option,” Brownscombe said. “We need to see what the proposal looks like. There is a process and money. There is an intent and commitment. We can talk about formalizing that.”

Brenda Bateman, from the Oregon Water Resources Department, explained how the county can apply for grant funding to have a new dam built. The State

Legislature has set aside \$54 million for such water projects.

Residents remained skeptical that a new dam would come in once the current one is removed.

Brownscombe addressed the concern by saying the removal is solely based on a risk to public safety and not a perceived dam removal agenda.

“We would not be having this conversation right now if it was not for the Canyon Creek Complex Fire and the

additional risk it brought to this situation,” he said.

Bruce Eddy, from the state department of fish and wildlife, said the potential for a serious landslide or flood being backed up by a fragile dam could very likely cause the dam to fail.

“That makes it worse by a quantum level,” he said.

The county court ended its hearing with the state by requesting more time and more clarifications on an approach for a new dam. Despite its concerns, the

county court ultimately acknowledged the decision is up to the state.

“To the state of Oregon, the dam is yours, the permit is yours, the decision is yours,” County Judge Scott Myers said. “I guess if we have not compelled you to do otherwise, we have no

other option than to take the dam out. It appears that your plan to proceed would be your option.”

The Blue Mountain Eagle was unable to confirm the status of the dam with ODFW Tuesday afternoon before going to press.

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FRI & SAT (4:20) 7:20 9:40
SUNDAY (4:20) 7:20
MON-THURS 7:20

A WALK IN THE WOODS R
After spending two decades in England, Bill Bryson returns to the U.S., where he decides the best way to connect with his homeland is to hike the Appalachian Trail with one of his oldest friends.
FRI & SAT (4:00) 7:00 9:30
SUNDAY (4:00) 7:00
MON-THURS 7:00

GOOSEBUMPS PG
A teenager teams up with the daughter of young adult horror author R.L. Stine after the writer's imaginary demons are set free.
FRI & SAT (4:10) 7:10 9:35
SUNDAY (4:10) 7:10
MON-THURS 7:10

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