

Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness proposal unresolved

Local opposition strong against 2.5 million-acre monument

By Eric Mortenson
EO Media Group

The occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge may have been broken, but a divisive wilderness proposal remains unresolved in Southeast Oregon.

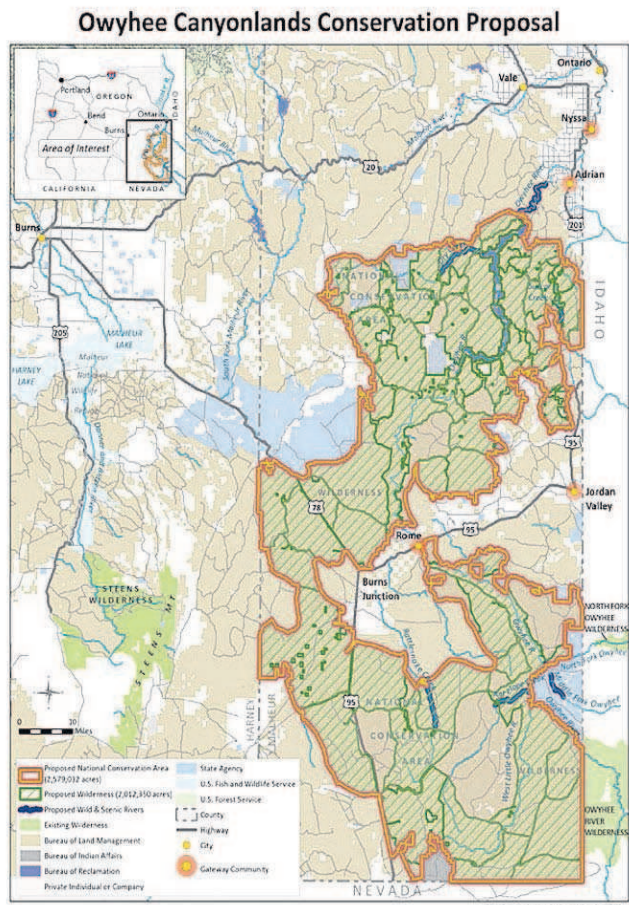
The underlying issues are familiar: anger over federal land management and government "over-reach" and frustration over loss of economic opportunity in the rural West.

The Bend-based environmental group Oregon Natural Desert Association, backed by the Keen Footwear company of Portland, has proposed a 2.5-million-acre Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness and conservation area.

Ranchers and other Malheur County residents are dead set against it.

"Not only no, but hell no," prominent rancher Bob Skinner said.

The Obama administration, which could establish the canyonlands area by presidential proclamation, has given no sign what it will do. Many people speculate the administration did not want to throw gas on the fire while the wildlife refuge occupation was going on.



Courtesy of wildowyhee.org

The proposed Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness and conservation area would cover 2.5 million acres in Southeast Oregon.

"We don't know where it is in the process, there's nobody who knows that," Skinner said.

The proposed area is bigger than the Yellowstone, Yosemite or Grand Canyon national parks, critics point out, and would cover 40 percent of Malheur County.

Residents believe the designation would be ac-

companied by restrictions and regulations that would prohibit or severely complicate grazing, mining, hunting and recreation.

While proponents say

traditional uses of the land will be allowed, a local group called Citizens in Opposition to the Owyhee Canyonlands Monument does not believe them.

Skinner, a fifth-generation rancher who leads the opposition group, said one faction believes ranchers and other landowners should "settle" with those pushing for establishment of the canyonlands.

But Skinner said agreements with "radical environmental groups" always turn out bad. While they say traditional land uses such as cattle grazing could continue, such assurances soon fall apart, Skinner said.

"Historically, every single solid time," he said. "It starts collapsing on the uses. That's historic, I can tell you."

Skinner said his contacts among Oregon's congressional delegation and others in Washington, D.C., indicate Obama will establish the wilderness and conservation area under the Antiquities Act, which can be done by presidential order and does not require approval of Congress.

A White House media staffer said the administration has "no announcement to make at this time" and

did not respond to detailed questions.

Jessica Kershaw, senior adviser and press secretary with the Department of Interior, said in an email that the department has not made a recommendation to the White House, "but we know that this is an important issue to many, and we will carefully consider all input about how to best manage these lands for current and future generations."

Brent Fenty, executive director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association, did not respond to a telephone call and email seeking comment.

A press secretary for U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, who represents Eastern Oregon in Congress, said Walden has repeatedly called upon the administration to say what it plans to do.

Early in the wildlife refuge occupation, Walden said Obama could ease some of the tension by backing away from the canyonlands proposal.

"If they don't plan to do it, they should just come out and say so," press secretary

Andrew Malcolm said in an email.

Skinner, the rancher, consistently distances his cause from the case made by the refuge occupiers.

"I don't agree with the Bundys at all, period," he said. "I don't agree with their methods, especially with grazing issues. But nobody can help but say, 'I can understand.'"

"Greg Walden said it: You understand why people have reached the end of their rope. That's why they've got followers."



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