

Conservationists look to Congress for help in preserving areas

A Conservationist's View of RARE II and Heppner Unit Roadless Areas

Rare II (Roadless Area Review and Evaluation), the Forest Service's on-going decision making process which began in the summer of 1977 is now coming to an end with recommendations from state and federal agencies; governors of states involved; and various environmental organizations, now being submitted to Congress who makes the final decision.

Past Oregon Governor Bob Straub had his sights set on a recommendation of over 700,000 acres in the State of Oregon. Even though this was far less than what environmentalists considered fair, it has come to be a far greater recommendation than the 380,000 acres recommended by the Forest Service and many times more generous than the 61,000 acres recommended by the wood products industry and Governor Victor Atiyeh in February 1979.

Conservationists are hot and angry about these latter recommendations. Rare II has been a grass-roots conservation effort from the beginning. The job of roadless area inventory was to be done by the Forest Service, but instead it took dedicated conservationists to accomplish the job which the Forest Service began under direction of Asst. Secretary of Agriculture Rupert Cutler. The Rare II decision is now in the hands of the 96th Congress, which will begin the job of trying to analyze the greatest public effort ever made in the name of conservation in the history of this country. Because of the enormous amount of data to evaluate and continued recommendations from conservationists, Congress will make few sudden, quick releases of land from the areas inventoried.

Following is an overview of roadless areas and their potentials that lie within the Heppner unit of the Umatilla National Forest.

Wapiti is the Shoshone Indian name for our American elk and the Wapiti wilderness is just exactly what it means: "A wilderness for the elk."

Of six sub-species of elk which were native to North America only four remain today. The two species which are extinct are the Merriam's Elk and Eastern Elk, natives of the plains states and Appalachian Mountains area. Why are they extinct today? Being constantly in conflict with man's conquest of their habitat they soon became a bygone resource, caused by both hunting and habitat loss.

Today's populations of elk which are indigenous (native) species exists only in areas of habitat which have not been lost to human habitation and development. The most populous of these species by far is the Rocky Mountain elk found in the Blue Mountains.

The Wapiti Wilderness is a complex of six small roadless islands of land totally surrounded by over a thousand miles of road and land being intensively managed for timber and livestock grazing. A population of about 4,000 elk use the roadless complex for summer and winter habitat. Being isolated individual areas, elk use habitat outside the roadless areas as they move from winter to summer range and as they use their habitat on a daily basis. The real value of these roadless areas for the elk comes during times of stress; hunting, winter, and during the summer and fall calving and breeding periods.

Natural habits of the elk make them extremely dependent on these last threads of habitat strategically located in a 220 square mile area known as the Heppner Planning Unit. Two Ranger Districts of the Umatilla National Forest are involved in the

Planning Unit; the entire Heppner Ranger District and that portion of the Ukiah District lying west of U.S. Highway 395.

The wilderness complex lies predominately in the Heppner District with two areas on the border of the Ukiah District. What is very unique about this complex is that three of the six areas—Hells Half Acre, Texas Butte and Kelly Prairie—comprise most of the lands used as summer range and three areas—Potamus, Skookum and Bologna Basin, are land used as winter range. What happens is the elk use about half of the proposed wilderness complex for six to seven months in the summer and the other half for about five months during the winter. Summer range then would be expressed as the Summer-Fall Range and the winter range as the Winter-Spring range, to be more accurate.

Secondly unique is the fact that summer and winter range areas in the complex lie North and South of each other with a relatively short distance separating summer and winter habitat.

Thirdly unique is that only 48,992 acres, 76 square miles is involved and is used by about 3,000 of the 4,000 elk which inhabit the area.

This area includes 17 landtypes; ranges from 2,800 ft. to nearly 6000 ft. and includes plant communities ranging from open bunch grass through juniper and sage to Ponderosa Pine and on up to climax fir, spruce and lodgepole Pine. The latter group dominates much of three roadless areas: Hells Half Acre, Kelly Prairie and Texas Butte.

Fourthly unique is that there is nothing in the way of management which will improve these areas for the elk; the herds are making maximum use of the areas. The preferred habitat demanded by elk not found anywhere else in unit. 1. elevation, 2. timber types, 3. soils, 4. temperatures, 5. Overall plant community type (ecosystems), 6. Most important solitude, hiding cover, escapement from human harassment. These areas are all that remain for the elk; it's up to you to do something about the problem!

Fifthly unique is that the main drainages of the unit all head within or flow through the wilderness complex and that the remaining wild anadromous fish (steelhead) habitat is dependent on these areas.

Sixth and most unique is that because of natural habitat diversity all wildlife species found in the Heppner Planning Unit are found here and that the oldgrowth forest which remains supports populations of species which are dependent on this plant community type or are dominately found within only the wilderness complex!

This wilderness complex is readily accessible to all people, young and old and has values which if lost by other forest uses will be lost forever and will cause many impacts on the local communities which will greatly change peoples lives.

To make more clear why this area should be wilderness, this data from the Heppner Land Use Plan and that which I have put together and collected from experience (on the ground knowledge) and help from other conservationists; many of them professional resource people in the fields of wildlife and timber management; will help explain why wilderness management is important!

Before a land use plan can be implemented or even put together the land use planner must know the different kinds and potentials of the resources

which are being managed. This data has been compiled by identifying the different landtypes which exist in the unit.

As described by the Forest Service in the Heppner Land Use Plan, "A landtype is a unit of land identified on the basis of similarities in conditions of vegetation type, landforms, soil, slope (and its aspect) and geology. A landtype is thus a relatively (but not pure) homogeneous land area with similar capabilities and responses to management activities.

The various resources are referred to as being commodity or amenity. A commodity resource is something which has a value, this is a dollar value; example, timber, minerals, forage (grass) etc. An amenity resource is one of which no set value can be placed on such wildlife for viewing, scenic or historic values and many other resources contributing to recreation and scientific values of which there is no set value placed upon. Many of these values or resources are important for the experiences which they provide the public!

There are 25 landtypes in this unit of 271,155 acres (424 square miles). The average timber productivity for the entire unit is 37.7 cubic feet, or (190) board feet per acre per year. Sixteen landtypes are not capable of producing 50 cubic feet and total 210,660 acres and 77 per cent of the unit. Nine landtypes produce greater than 50 cubic feet per acre per year, and total 60,450 acres and 23 per cent of the unit.

The average productivity of those landtypes below 50 cubic feet is 22.2 cubic feet and they range from 1.4 to 48.5 cubic feet. Those landtypes which produce over 50 cubic feet average 65.2 cubic feet (327) board feet and range from 53.6 to 90 cubic feet.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires the Forest Service to—Identify lands which are not suited for timber production, considering physical, economic and other pertinent factors to the extent feasible—and shall insure that, except for salvage sales or sales necessitated to protect other multiple use values, no timber harvesting shall occur on such lands for a period of ten years.

At present lands which have a capability of twenty cubic feet per acre per year are considered commercial forest land. Here is where the problem lies. 20 cubic feet is now considered the minimum productivity for commercial forests but most professional foresters also believe that any timber stands producing less than 50 cubic feet are not really considered profitable to manage. With 77 per cent of the Heppner Unit producing less than 50 cubic feet the public should be very concerned about what is actually happening out there on the forest. It's yours, don't forget!

It is the intent of the 1976 Forest Management Act to withdraw all marginal lands which are not suitable for timber management, including the physical aspects of the land as well. It is quite clear that a much more restrictive definition is needed for what is actually commercial forest land, based on all considerations including most of all the cost benefit ratio!

The fact that roadless lands being studied or inventoried for wilderness contain stands of commercial timber, has been the dominate objection against wilderness management.

What the public needs to consider here is future generations; their rights and opportunities as stated in the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960 and the Wilderness Management Act of 1964 as

designated by Congress!

(a) "Multiple use" means: The management of all the various renewable surface resources of the national forests so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the needs of the American people; making the most judicious use of the land for some or all of these resources or related services over areas large enough to provide sufficient latitude for periodic adjustments in use to conform to changing needs and conditions; that some land will be

used for less than all of the resources; and harmonious and coordinated management of the various resources each with the other, without impairment of the productivity of the land, with consideration being given to the relative values of the various resources; and not necessarily the combination of uses that will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest unit output.

(b) "Sustained yield of the several products and services" means the achievement and maintenance in perpetuity of a high level

annual or regular periodic output of the various renewable resources of the National Forests without impairment of the productivity of the land.

From the Wilderness Management Act Section 2 (a) In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness. For this

purpose there is hereby established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as "wilderness areas", and these shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so provide for protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness; and no federal lands shall be designated as "wilderness areas" except as provided for in this Act or by a subsequent Act.



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Before...

Conservationists fear that major wildlife species dependent on old growth timber and roadless areas will suffer if some areas aren't preserved. At right is the Forest Service's Wickiup sale before logging, showing heavy ground cover, thick forest and old-growth timber.

...and after

The same Wickiup sale area after logging and commercial thinning operations show what conservationists term "a manicured floor." Logging removes thermal cover, snags and old-growth timber used by many wildlife species.



Forest land natives

The majestic Rocky Mountain Elk and Great Gray Owl are two wildlife species conservationists say are dependent on old-growth timber and dense ground cover. At present between 3,500-4,000 elk range in the Blue Mountains surrounding Heppner and the owl pictured here is one of four known recorded nests in Oregon, located in the Swale Creek area of the Texas Butte roadless area. Other wildlife species conservationists fear losing if all roadless areas are logged include: cougar, bobcat, Black bear, Pine Marten, trophy buck, Mule deer, flying squirrel, Prairie falcon, Pileated woodpecker, Goshawk, Merriam turkey, Golden and Bald eagle and steelhead.

