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Preserve-Grazing Swap Sought

By Ken Olsen
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After a decade of conflict, environmentalists and cattle ranchers are close to announcing a deal to designate more than 400,000 acres of southern Idaho's Owyhee canyon lands as federally protected wilderness.

In return, ranchers would gain the right to outside reviews before the federal government could reduce the number of cattle they graze on the public lands. Ranchers could trade their grazing leases for cash or other public land, according to a draft of the proposed deal arrived at by the group, which calls itself the Owyhee Initiative.

The Owyhee Initiative expects to hand Idaho's congressional delegation the terms of its pact within weeks and is confident it will pass this year. If it clears Congress, the deal will become a model for resolving similar conflicts across the country, the deal's brokers say.

"Most of the cattlemen feel really good about it," said Owyhee County Commissioner Chris Salove, who grew up ranching in the area and now runs a hardware store in Marshing, Idaho. "It's finally the tool that's going to give them some security."

Some environmentalists share that enthusiasm.

"We're close to protecting the most wilderness-worthy stuff," said John McCarthy of the Idaho Conservation League.

Simultaneously, the proposal is drawing intense criticism from hunters, land trade opponents and other conservation groups -- suspicious of the secretive feel of the negotiations and certain the most fragile areas in the Owyhees won't be protected nor will damage from off-road motorcyclists and cattle grazing be addressed. They also question the wisdom of trading land for grazing privileges and warn the Owyhee Initiative's proposal contains many special provisions that would lower standards for wilderness protection everywhere.

"It's a Sagebrush Rebel's dream," said biologist Katie Fite, who runs the Committee for Idaho's High Desert. "I don't think that the product that comes out of this will resemble most people's idea of wilderness."

Contentious history: Owyhee County is a 4.9 million-acre expanse of deep volcanic canyons churning through sage-steppe uplands and capped by juniper forests.

Two of its major rivers carried salmon and steelhead in the days before dams. Some of the remotest reaches of this parched outback, which extends west into Oregon and south into Nevada, still shelter desert bighorn sheep, elk, sage grouse and redband trout.

Two paved highways and a well-groomed gravel scenic route -- called Mud Flat Road -- constitute most of the easy access to this territory.

Although it is within a few hours drive of the booming Boise-Nampa-Caldwell metropolitan center, this is lost and lonely country that attracts white-water enthusiasts for a short annual season but otherwise is exploited primarily for raising sheep, horses and cattle.

Owyhee County became an unwilling center of attention in the 1990s when the Air Force became interested in turning more than a million acres of it into a practice bombing range for Mountain Home Air Force Base near Boise. Conservationists started combing the area to gauge the potential consequences and eventually helped trim the new bombing range to 12,000 acres plus scattered radar sites.

They lobbied then-President Clinton to create a 2.7 million-acre Owyhee Canyon Lands National Monument

and floated an alternative proposal of a 1.3 million-acre wilderness area.

Lawsuits, meanwhile, challenged the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's grazing oversight, ultimately forcing the agency to reduce cattle numbers on some of the public range it oversees. And noxious weeds have increasingly consumed once productive grazing land and wildlife habitat.

Battered by these conflicts, as well as drought, poor cattle prices and fatigue, Owyhee County two years ago invited environmental groups including the Idaho Conservation League and the Nature Conservancy -- which owns a ranch and grazing privileges on 68,000-acres of the public domain -- to join cattle ranchers, county commissioners and others at the bargaining table.

"The fight had gotten so ugly, there was no other option," Owyhee County Commissioner Salove said.

Consensus or capitulation? Owyhee Initiative members are expected to vote this week on the legislative proposal they plan for Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, to pilot through Congress. Ranchers are adamant that it include a scientific review team they can turn to when they contend the BLM, which manages 75 percent of the land in the county, is unfairly cutting their livestock allotments.

"This group will basically be a watchdog over BLM and any other government land manager," Salove said. "Cattlemen feel what they do can be justified scientifically if they can get a fair review."

The BLM says it welcomes the additional review.

Other basic tenets of the agreement include a research center, probably to be run by the Nature Conservancy, to study noxious weeds and fire problems.

Wilderness protection would be bestowed on some of the area's canyons, and wild and scenic status is planned for some of the rivers.

Ranchers would get assurances that wilderness designation won't limit cattle numbers or end their ability to use motorized vehicles to maintain their grazing allotments in the wilderness, according to the plan.

The Nature Conservancy, however, does not plan to retire its 68,000-acre grazing permit, which would become part of the wilderness.

Still, Russ Heughins, president of Idaho Bird Hunters and a member of the BLM area citizen advisory council, fears his constituents will lose access to key areas.

"The hunters get nothing. The fishermen could lose too," Heughins said.

His organization is even more uncomfortable with the scientific review team. "We don't need some county-appointed advisory committee to be second guessing BLM decisions. It's all a stalling game."

Fite, who logged years of work for Idaho Fish and Game in the Owyhees before joining the High Desert Committee, said only the most scenic and least threatened areas would receive wilderness designation, "undercutting future protection for some of the most biologically important and truly wild areas."

Simultaneously the most fragile landscape -- a stretch nearest Boise called the Owyhee Front -- would get no relief from off-highway vehicles.

Finally, trading public land for grazing permits cheats taxpayers, and making it part of this deal will make it more common everywhere, said Janine Blaeloch of the Seattle-based Western Land Exchange Project.

"It's not legitimate to trade something real -- public land -- for something ephemeral, such as a so-called grazing right," Blaeloch said.

"If you get two or three environmental groups signing on in Idaho, the state of Utah will turn around and say why can't we do this here."

Fear of secrecy, precedents: Opponents of the Owyhee Initiative are most angered by what they view as secret negotiations they fear will spark a new era of weaker wilderness protection.

"Over the winter, they put out the word that not much was happening," Fite said. "Meanwhile, they were making deals."

Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League, dismisses the charges.

"Everybody in the conservation community knows what's being talked about," he said.

He also dismisses a litany of critics who say this is a diluted wilderness bill that sets a bad national precedent.

"A precedent is something that happens that is bad," Johnson said. "Creativity is something that happens that is good."

That's a dangerous approach, warns George Nickas, executive of Wilderness Watch in Missoula, Mont.

"If, for the sake of expediency, we make exceptions in wilderness bills, we make it harder to preserve the character of these wild places forever," Nickas said. "Cheap wilderness is just that . . . easier to get and easier to lose."

Pacific Northwest journalist Ken Olsen is a 2003 Alicia Patterson Foundation journalism fellow.



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