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## Conservationists warn against Owyhee deal

By Ken Olsen  
Special to The Tribune

A growing number of conservationists say giving special guarantees to southeastern Idaho cattle ranchers in return for wilderness protection for approximately 450,000 acres of the Owyhee canyon lands could backfire.

Representatives of more than 30 environmental groups have written a five-page letter to the boards of the Idaho Conservation League, Wilderness Society and Sierra Club encouraging them to withdraw from the so-called Owyhee Initiative. The effort was started by the Owyhee County Commissioners two years ago. It is close to handing Idaho's congressional delegation a bill it hopes will be introduced and passed this year.

"Striking these types of deals undermines efforts by grassroots organizations around the country to pass strong wilderness legislation that protects watersheds and valuable wildlife habitat," said Craig Axford of the Utah Environmental Congress, one of three Utah groups that signed the letter. "They are playing into the hands of the conservatives in Congress that argue America doesn't want wilderness and strong environmental protection -- and I think they are underestimating America's support for wilderness."

The letter criticizes the secretive nature of negotiations between environmentalists, ranchers and government officials. It also takes issue with provisions to create a scientific board that would review decisions by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to reduce livestock grazing on public lands.

"The creation of special interest boards with de facto authority only moves land management further beyond the reach of the public," the letter says.

Finally, the letter cautions that trading public land for grazing leases -- an idea that environmental participants in the initiative say is long dead -- could end up back in the bill at the last minute.

The Sierra Club says it's mindful of the potential pitfalls.

"Our organization is looking at the details of this effort very critically," said Roger Singer, Sierra Club's regional representative in Idaho. "While this type of process requires compromise, the final package still has to improve protection for the wildlife and the landscape" in order to gain the group's backing.

The Idaho Conservation League, meanwhile, says most of the people who signed the letter haven't shown any interest in the Owyhee Initiative. Others have received regular updates about the negotiations and can hardly claim to be left out of the loop, said John McCarthy of the Conservation League.

As to breaking dangerous new ground, the bill "isn't going to be a Frankenstein monster not seen before," McCarthy said. "The precedents we are setting are advantageous to conservation interests and community interests."

That includes Owyhee County becoming the first county in Idaho to ban off-road and off-trail use of motorcycles and similar recreational vehicles, McCarthy said. Simultaneously, environmentalists participating in the initiative believe they will deliver hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness and hundreds of miles of rivers.

In addition to the scientific review team, the Owyhee legislation is expected to call for a board of directors and an advisory council, as well as a science research center run by the Nature Conservancy. Idaho Conservation League, a likely member of the oversight board, said these features will help ensure that ranchers and other local interests won't overwhelm public lands protections.

But a veteran of the Steens Mountain Advisory Council, a first-of-its-kind group established by Congress to advise the BLM regarding management of eastern Oregon lands, said his experience makes him look upon

such groundbreaking ideas "with much trepidation."

When environmentalists are close to gaining more wilderness after such diligent effort, it's tempting to see such innovations as innocuous, but they are not, said Jerry Sutherland of Portland, Ore., who is the statewide environmental representative on the Steens council.

Out on the ground "these innovations can become a wild cannon," he said. "You never know where the ball is going to land."

"If anybody on the other side of table is insisting on something dramatic, that's never been done before, I'd run for the hills," Sutherland added. "It's easy to assume things are innocuous. Assume the worst-case scenario."

In the Steens, for example, environmentalists are fighting to stop ranchers and landowners from driving in the wilderness at will.

In that respect, "we are faced with the prospect of ending up with a wilderness in name only," Sutherland said.

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



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