

Land talks heat up over Owyhee Canyonlands

Environmentalists fear that conservation groups on panel are 'selling out'

Carissa Wolf

Go ahead and call it your back yard. Right now, the Owyhee Canyonlands are a place to play, escape and experience nature.

However, some call it a battlefield for ranchers who see a profitable range and conservationists who see one of the nation's last wild treasures.

In a historic move, a few sparing foes decided to sit at the same table and hash out a compromise for the contested land that would determine how you play and what you see when you visit the largely uninhabited expanse of 4,500-plus square miles.

After nearly two years of talks, some of the foes now call each other friends while parties who all work for the Owyhees under the banner "conservationist" stand divided.

As the hand-picked committee charged with developing a plan for the controversy-ridden Owyhee Canyonlands and surrounding desert moves closer to presenting a compromise bill, environmentalists are still at odds over leaked specifics of the proposal and the manner in which it was developed.

A coalition of 36 local and national conservation groups recently presented a letter to leaders of three environmental groups selected to sit on the Owyhee Initiative, asking them to withdraw from the process and reconsider the implications of tentative plans intended to protect wilderness while maintaining grazing and motorized vehicle use in the remote desert.

The letter, addressed to the heads of the Idaho Conservation League, The Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, represents a "schism" between environmental interests and was drafted out of frustration over the secretive manner in which talks of the Owyhee's future have proceeded, one of the signers said.

"We basically feel that the three or four conservation groups that were elitely invited to take part in the process are basically selling out," said Gwen Sanchirico, publications committee chair of the Idaho Green Party, one of the groups that signed the letter.

The coalition contends Owyhee wilderness areas would have less protection than they have now if plans detailed in preliminary drafts of the Owyhee Initiative proposal passed Congress.

During the last days of the Clinton administration, the area, which represents one of the world's largest, most intact high desert shrub-steppe ecosystems, nearly became a national monument following years of disagreement over the use of the land.

In an effort to maintain local control of the sage-covered desert and keep ranchers on the public land, Owyhee County commissioners created the Owyhee Initiative, a hand-picked panel of ranchers, environmentalists and recreation enthusiasts, to hash out a legislative proposal that guides the use and protection of the land. Some environmental groups, including Western Watersheds, were specifically excluded from the negotiations.

The talks started nearly two years ago and now the 36 groups who signed the letter say they and the public have been left in the dark as the Owyhee Initiative drafted a plan the signees say exempts some of the most vulnerable areas of the Owyhees from protection. The signees contend the areas slotted for protection already are protected



Idaho Statesman file photo

The Owyhee River Canyon includes tranquil and turbulent whitewater, open grassy slopes, sheer vertical canyon walls, bighorn sheep, rare flowers and solitude. The Owyhee Canyonlands present visitors with both challenging and amazing experiences.



Idaho Statesman file photo

The canyonlands are home to a huge, flat, volcanic plateau where, for the past two million years, water has relentlessly carved canyons like the Bruneau/Jarbridge river system.

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Stay tuned

To understand the proposal that may change the future of this landscape, follow Thrive and Idaho Statesman coverage as we update you on the specifics of those plans. Or tell Congress what the region means to you

by rocks, canyons and remoteness.

"We know they will be cutting wilderness study areas ... that we worked 20 years to protect," said Katie Fite, a biologist who heads the Committee for the High Desert.

at www.congress.org and get involved with one of the dozens of groups that hold a stake in the Owyhee's future.

Roger Singer, an Owyhee Initiative panel member and director for the Northern Rockies Chapter of the Sierra Club, said the Initiative's proposal likely won't be available for public review for weeks, but the panel's conservationists are working toward a plan that would "get the best protection for wildlife and landscapes."

Singer said that because the panel still has to nail down some specific plans, judgments about the panel's negotiations are premature.

"There have been some bad ideas out there that have been tossed out," Singer said. "Unfortunately, some of the opposition has been based on that out-dated information."

John McCarthy, conservation director of the Idaho Conservation League, said the plans are "in too many pieces and changing too much. We'd like folks to hang in there and they'll have the chance to shoot it or praise it."

He said that since the panel's talks began, the Initiative's meetings have been open to the public, and individuals and environmental groups, including a number of the letter's signees, were invited through e-mail and other means to give their input.

Fite said genuine invitations to participate never materialized and the e-mail communications and updates they received from conservationists on the panel were vague.

The letter, signed by local conservation groups including the Committee for the High Desert, Western Watersheds, Idaho Sporting Congress and the Idaho Green Party cited recent media reports that detailed specifics of the proposal, including land exchanges that would trade public land for grazing permits, right of way access and conservation easements. They warned some of the proposals could possibly circumvent the National Environmental Policy Act and shift control of the land from public to commercial interests.

Janine Blaeloch, director of the Seattle-based Western Land Exchange, also signed the letter and said the move toward land exchanges draws a schism between environmentalists who fight for compliance with existing environmental laws and those willing to enter into negotiations.

"In the old days, if you wanted wilderness, you got wilderness. You didn't pay for it by trading away public land," Blaeloch said. "The job of the environmentalist is to protect the environment, period — not make deals and write laws. If you're going to make land deals, you need to call yourself a real estate broker."

Singer and McCarthy said the panel's discussions have been based on compromise, and without compromise, there would be no wilderness protection.

"We're dealing in the real world in a very conservative state, and that we're having these discussions in the first place is pretty good," Singer said.

Fite questioned conservationists' ability to compromise on a panel she said is heavily weighted toward commercial interests. Of the 12 Owyhee Initiative panel members, four are conservationists, four represent the ranching community, two represent recreation interests, one represents the U.S. Air Force and a non-voting member represents the BLM.

Fite said the panel's make-up makes it easy for the conservationists to "sell-out," but McCarthy said that through the talks, at least 450,000 acres will be protected, including the core of the canyonlands.

The letter's signees say that's not enough and thousands of other acres are in desperate need of protection. But McCarthy said wilderness protection comes down to negotiation or nothing.

"It's going to pain me to see some areas not protected as wilderness, but we're protecting the best," he said.

The Idaho Statesman contributed to this report

Understanding the land and the proposal

Try to drive across the expanse of the Owyhee Canyonlands and surrounding region. You likely won't make it far beyond one of the area's few rut-ridden dirt roads. But you will see a slice of one of the world's largest and most intact shrub-steppe ecosystems.

The land covers an expanse larger than Yellowstone National Park, supplying riparian and desert homes for dozens of rare plant and animal species, including sage grouse, spotted bats and pronghorn antelope. The region's contrast of wet and dry juxtaposes rolling, savannah-like landscapes with lush, water-carved canyons and breath-taking cliff vistas.

Few people inhabit the region, but humans have not come without leaving a trace. The walls of the East Fork Canyon bear the petroglyph markings of the region's earliest human inhabitants — the Shoshone and Paiute tribes; motorized vehicle trails slice through the sage desert; stream banks bear the tell-tale trample marks of cattle hooves. And tree stands as old as 1,600 years mark the region's history while an appointed panel and congressional vote will determine its future.

To understand this unique land, take a hike.

Link

To read the letter signed by 36 individuals and conservation groups, log onto www.westlx.org/assets/Owyheeletter.pdf.

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