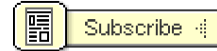
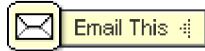


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Janine Blaeloch and Katie Fite: Owyhee negotiations could produce a dubious 'win-win' situation

The Statesman's recent editorial on the Owyhee Initiative (OI) was consistent with your largely unquestioning treatment of the proposal. But your call for the OI's critics to "take a deep breath" echoes a little too faithfully the "just trust us" message we've gotten from the OI proponents for almost two years.



Janine Blaeloch

Working with the bits of conceptual information meted out to us, as well as two drafts of OI legislation language, we've made no secret of our growing concerns about this proposal.



Katie Fite

Why is this our business? Federal lands are the business of every citizen, not just locals who want to work things out among themselves.

Like bills already passed in Oregon and Nevada, the Owyhee proposal threatens to further lower the bar in public lands policy and reinforce the notion that straightforward protection of wild lands is a thing of the past.

What could we lose in the OI? As of now, 175,000 to 250,000 acres of Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) would be "released" to new inroads — more cattle, new livestock developments, juniper burns, off-road vehicles, weed infestations — impacts that would preclude future wilderness designation. The OI includes "shavings" that would slice into WSAs and allow placement of new livestock facilities that would impact any neighboring wilderness.

What would be protected, on the other hand, are "cherry-picked" deep canyons and remote areas already protected by their very inaccessibility and many by their lack of usefulness to ranchers and OHV users.

Still to be defined, and barely discussed by the OI's conservationists, is the level of actual protection to be afforded any Owyhee wilderness. Ranchers have made it clear that a bottom line for them is "appropriate management" of the wilderness, to include motorized vehicle use and a probable laundry list of special provisions to make the "wilderness" a little more like the family ranch.

Unhappy with the BLM's attempt to uphold grazing regulations, ranchers are insisting on — and negotiators are agreeing to — establishment of committees to review land use decisions in the Owyhee. While nominally "advisory," these committees would have access to information and opportunities for input well before the public, and their de facto authority wouldn't be tempered by any accountability standards. This process would ensure that the public would be distanced from ongoing decisions on the Owyhee.



An alarming proposal that would allow ranchers to exchange grazing permits, conservation easements, or access for public lands acreage was recently disavowed by OI conservationist members, perhaps due to what the Statesman calls our “carping.”

The problem is, once this proposal emerges from the meat grinder of the OI consensus group, it will proceed to Congress, where expedience is the goal and real debate unlikely. Late-night embellishments could make an already compromised proposal infinitely worse for the Owyhee. If the OI is a model for the future, hard-won environmental laws expressing the will of the majority and the intrinsic values of federal lands will be shunted aside in favor of local control, mutual accommodation, and a dubious “win-win” deal at the end of the rainbow.


The Statesman advises critics to back off, but in our view there could be no more critical time to speak out.

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