

The Idaho Statesman

Panel on brink of Owyhee Canyons deal; Compromise on protection won't please everyone

By Rocky Barker
Idaho Statesman

Ranchers, environmentalists, recreationists and local officials are close to a deal to preserve the Owyhee Canyonlands, keep ranchers in business and restore damaged range.

But as the panel, appointed by Owyhee County's Board of Commissioners, hammers out the final details, critics are raising concerns about key elements of the proposed deal.

The commission established the group, called the Owyhee Initiative, two years ago to seek a resolution to environmental disputes that threatened ranchers' survival and left the scenic canyons and uplands unprotected.

If the panel strikes a deal, it will be sent to the Owyhee commission for approval. The commission would forward it to Congress.

"I'm confident we have a bill," said Fred Grant, the Nampa lawyer who moderates the panel for Owyhee County. "In a month, I'm confident we'll have the details ready to present to the board."

Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, has pledged to carry the bill in Congress if the group reaches agreement.

"I have very strong confidence in those that are working in this collaborative effort," Crapo said.

The deal

The deal as it stands so far would:

- ✍ Designate more than 450,000 acres of canyons and uplands as federally protected wilderness, where motorized use, mining and other new development is prohibited. Thousands of those acres also would be free of grazing cattle.
- ✍ Protect hundreds of miles of rivers under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which limits dam building and other development.
- ✍ Release to multiple use at least 175,000 acres of wilderness study areas, now managed as wilderness, allowing ranchers to build new fences and water projects so they can graze more cattle without hurting rangeland and creek bottoms. Another 75,000 acres of existing wilderness study areas still are under discussion.
- ✍ Authorize the purchase from several ranchers of their public land grazing permits so it can be retired.
- ✍ Provide for the purchase of land and easements to ensure access to the isolated canyons.
- ✍ Approve additional funding for search and rescue and enforcement of travel restrictions to both the BLM and Owyhee County.
- ✍ Restrict most motorized travel to approved roads, trails and open areas throughout Owyhee County. Currently, the restrictions are limited to the western third of the county. Lifting the wilderness study area restrictions would open new areas to motorized use.
- ✍ Establish a board of directors with balance between the groups negotiating the deal, and establish a Conservation and Research Center that will develop a conservation and research program scaled to the Owyhees' landscape.
- ✍ Set up a scientific peer review process of the regulatory actions of the Bureau of Land Management, which controls the public lands of Owyhee County. A rancher or other interested party could request scientists to analyze how the BLM researched its decision. This independent review could not limit the BLM's power nor delay its decision. The resulting report would become part of the official record and could be considered by a federal administrative judge if the decision is appealed.

Unresolved issues

Most of the 11 voting members of the initiative panel have reached agreement on most of the proposal. Still at issue is the size and number of wilderness areas, access and some considerations for individual ranchers.

"There are still some big issues outstanding," said Sandra Mitchell, who represents People for the Owyhees on the panel, which advocates motorized recreation access. "We still have some issues on finality and some backcountry recreation area designations."

Roger Singer, director of the Northern Rockies Chapter of the Sierra Club, was added to the panel in April, reflecting the political reality that the national environmental group has the power to stop any deal in Congress. He joined representatives of the Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy and the Idaho Conservation League as environmental interests on the panel.

He said the Sierra Club's national board still has concerns about the precedents that may be created in the bill. His and other environmental groups are concerned about how the bill will address water rights, an issue that remains unresolved.

"I hope we can still reach an agreement, but our group is giving a critical look at the details of the final package," Singer said.

Critics question the process

The Owyhee Initiative's meetings are open to the public, but the proposals have changed dramatically since the panel began talks two years ago. As pieces of the deal have leaked out, critics have jumped on ideas they opposed. Many since have been dropped, including land exchanges and land trades for grazing permit retirement.

That has bred distrust among groups on all sides that are represented by others at the table. Janine Blaeloch, executive director of the Western Land Exchange Project, a Seattle-based public land watchdog group, opposes the initiative and urges conservation groups to oppose it.

"I don't think they are representing our interests," Blaeloch said of the conservationists on the panel. "I don't think we're getting straight answers from them." "I know from experience, when you go into those closed-door meetings, a lot of bottom lines shift."

Russ Heughins of the Idaho Bird Hunters Association and the Ada County Fish and Game League said he believes the peer review panel gives ranchers too much power and may allow them to delay grazing reductions.

"We view it as having the potential to allow the county to run things out there," he said.

On the other side of the debate, Dick Bass, a former Owyhee County Commissioner, longtime rancher and one of the organizers of People for the Owyhees, also opposes the process. He believes it designates too much wilderness.

"The public is not involved," Bass said.

"I think the opposition will come around by election time," he said.

Panel urges patience

Cindy Bachman, a rancher who represents the Owyhee County Soil Conservation Districts on the panel, urged people on all sides of the issue to be patient and wait until they see the final package.

"The conservationists, the ranchers, the county, the landowners and the motorized groups all have these splinter groups trying to derail us," she said. "We, at the table, all know where each other stands."

Crapo said no one can expect to get all they want. But he is confident that if the Owyhee Initiative panel reaches an agreement, he can get it approved in Congress.

"Those groups that could stop this have been brought into the process," Crapo said. "That gives it a strong probability of success."

Who is on the Owyhee Initiative panel, who do they represent, and what are their interests?

Inez Jaca, a rancher from near Marsing, represents the Owyhee commissioners. She carries their concerns and those of ranchers to the table.

Ted Hoffman, a rancher and veterinarian, represents the Owyhee Borderlands Trust, a stockgrower-dominated conservation group. He speaks for ranchers. John McCarthy, conservation director for the Idaho Conservation League, is pressing for as much wilderness as possible.

Craig Gehrke is the Northern Rockies representative of the Wilderness Society, a national group that seeks to protect more wilderness.

Howard Hedrick, a non-voting member, represents the Bureau of Land Management, which controls the federal public lands in Owyhee County.

Chad Gipson, a retired University of Idaho range scientist, represents the Owyhee Cattlemen's Association. He has been one of the technical Experts of the panel pushing rancher concerns on range management.

Cindy Bachman, a rancher from south of Bruneau, represents the Owyhee County Soil Conservation Districts. She speaks for people from the eastern side of Owyhee County and landowners in general.

Lou Lunte is the conservation director of the Idaho Chapter of the Nature Conservancy. This national group owns the 45 Ranch in southern Owyhee County and seeks research and management to protect wildlife habitat and biological diversity.

Roger Singer is director of the Northern Rockies Chapter of the Sierra Club. This national conservation group seeks wilderness protection, Wild and Scenic Rivers protection and overall protection of the environment.

Grant Simonds, executive director of the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association, represents river outfitters and hunting guides. He also is expected to represent private hunter interests.

Sandra Mitchell, Idaho Snowmobile Association executive director, represents People for the Owyhees, which advocates motorized recreation access. She seeks to limit wilderness boundaries and help fund management of motorized use.

Bruce Wong (photo not available), a colonel in the U.S. Air Force, represents the military interest in training facilities in Owyhee County.

Questions and answers about the Owyhee Initiative

What is the Owyhee Initiative? It is a collaborative process designed to write legislation to develop and put into place a landscape program in Owyhee County that preserves and restores a functioning natural system and provides for economic stability by keeping livestock grazing viable.

Who set it up? The Owyhee County Board of Commissioners.

Why? The Clinton administration nearly designated more than a million acres of the county as a national monument without local involvement. Lawsuits threaten to force many ranchers out of business.

Why are conservation groups participating? Uncontrolled off-road motorized use is threatening the wilderness character of parts of the scenic canyonlands and uplands they hope to preserve.

What happens next? If the panel strikes a deal, it will be sent to the Owyhee commissioners for approval. They will send it on to Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, who has pledged to introduce a bill and carry it through Congress.

How can I express my opinion or get involved? Contact the members of the panel who most closely represent your interest. Or write Chairman, Owyhee Initiative Work Group, P.O. Box 1272, Nampa, ID 83653 or e-mail at Owyheeinitiativehotmail.com

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Rocky Barker at rbarkeridahostatesman.com or 377-6484.
