

S 2828 Testimony Senate Energy and Natural Resource Committee Public Lands,  
Forests and Mining Subcommittee

September 16, 2020

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Mark Dunn and I represent the Owyhee Basin Stewardship Coalition. The OBSC is composed of ranchers, hunters, recreationalists and local business owners in Malheur County, Oregon. Malheur County is the poorest Oregon County in terms of economic activity. Seventy-two percent of the area is federal public land. Agriculture is the sustaining enterprise in the region, with cattle ranching as a significant contributor to this activity. These family based ranching operations are sustained through the use of permitted cattle grazing on public lands.

For many years this area has been embroiled in controversy as groups with differing points of view regarding how federal public lands should be used became focused on the Owyhee Canyonlands. This has resulted in costly lawsuits and delays in important management issues. Most recently those efforts revolved around an attempt to ask the President to create a National Monument encompassing most of the public land in the County.

OBSC was formed to prevent a Monument from being designated. Once that perceived threat was temporarily removed, the Coalition members decided a proactive approach was better suited for the long-term benefit of the public federal and the community. We believed that a collaborative approach focused on the health of the land and traditional land uses could create an environment whereby a long-term resolution to conflicts might be possible.

In December of 2018, leadership from the OBSC and I traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Senator Wyden and his staff. At that meeting we asked Senator Wyden if he would be willing to lead an effort to bring various parties together to find a solution. We made clear that enhancing land health was the focus and goal. We are very grateful to Senator Wyden and his staff for agreeing to take on this challenging issue.

Throughout 2019 Senator Wyden and his staff regularly met with representatives of OBSC and environmental groups with an interest in the area. Their tireless efforts, supported by Senator Merkley, are the reason this legislation is before you today.

There are some areas in the bill where OBSC believes agreement was reached and that require more precise definition. In a perfect world there are other language clarifications and enhancements we would have preferred. I am happy to provide those

to the committee separately. I will proceed to summarize some of those specifics as follows.

To start, over two million acres of public land in Malheur County are designated as either current wilderness study areas (WSAs) or lands with wilderness characteristics (LWCs). As you may know, WSAs and LWCs are managed as *de facto* Wilderness. This legislation creates slightly more than one million acres of Wilderness while releasing over one million acres back to multiple use. OBSC feels this release needs to be clarified in the language of the bill.

To continue, there are incredibly valuable precedent setting aspects of this bill which could be used as a model in other areas of the western United States. One of those is given that land health was the driving factor of the negotiations, the use of “adaptive management” tools on all federal public land, designated or with administrative overlays, in the County is invaluable. That will not only allow, but also require, federal agencies to use best practices to maintain and improve land conditions. It will ensure seamless practices throughout the county in restoration and multiple-use.

Another precedent setting aspect of the bill is the CEO committee, as Senator Wyden calls it. This allows the local community as well as other interested parties an opportunity to help direct priorities and management objectives with the focus on what’s best to maintain land health. Since diverse groups have a seat at this table, we would appreciate clarification providing additional oversight capabilities for the group. We would ask that this committee have authority and does not become another advisory group that agencies can ignore.

The legislation also provides various needed drivers of new economic activity for the County. It strives to enhance protections for sensitive ecosystem areas and allow for better access for visitors, campers and sightseers where appropriate. We support those efforts.

In conclusion, it was our members, who derive their livelihood from these lands, who asked Senator Wyden to undertake this process. We feel he and his staff did an outstanding job and we strongly support his efforts and are grateful to him.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and your consideration of this bill which is critically important to all residents of Malheur County.