

Testimony of Forrest Reinhardt
Submitted to the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests
On
S. 2963, the Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven Wilderness Act of 2010,
Jan 28, 2010

Chairman Wyden and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding Senate Bill 2963 on behalf of Young Life, Derby-Smith Partners and the Oregon Natural Desert Association also known as ONDA. ONDA is a 1,400 member non-profit organization whose mission is to protect, defend and restore Oregon's high desert. Young Life is one of the largest Christian youth organizations in the United States and serves tens of thousands of children every year. Young Life and Derby-Smith Partners both own lands immediately adjacent to the proposed Wilderness areas. We are thankful for the support of Senators Wyden and Merkley in developing legislation to permanently protect Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven as federally-designated wilderness areas.

Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven are natural treasures that merit permanent protection as Wilderness. Located on the John Day Wild and Scenic River, the proposed Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven wilderness areas are a tapestry of rolling hills, providing spectacular vistas of the river and the surrounding landscape. This unique wild area offers a profusion of desert wildflowers in the spring, along with recreational opportunities for boaters, hikers, horseback riders, hunters, botanists, and other outdoor enthusiasts. The area also provides valuable habitat for a variety of wildlife including Rocky Mountain elk, cougars, mule deer, bobcats, mountain bluebirds, prairie falcons and golden eagles.

The fragmentation of public and private lands is an enduring problem in the John Day basin. Because land ownership often looks like a checkerboard, it is not clear when you're on the ground where public land ends and private land begins. This creates confusion about access and inevitably results in management conflicts such as trespass and illegal hunting on private lands.

The proposal considered today is the work of diverse interests including neighboring landowners, county government officials, conservationists, and recreationists. As such the proposal accomplishes several important objectives including the: 1) permanent protection of Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven as Wilderness, 2) consolidation of land ownership that will improve public and private land management, and 3) improved access to public lands.

The land exchanges and proposed Wilderness boundaries of these areas were set up in a way that greatly expands public access while respecting the needs of neighboring private landowners. The adjacent landowners are willing to work with BLM staff to ensure they have the access that they need to administrate the areas, even if that means occasionally crossing through private lands. Due to the historic confusion created by the fragmented parcels, this does mean that one of the two areas, the nearly 8,000-acre Cathedral Rock area, will be accessed only via the John Day River. This is not a new concept in the region. All three wilderness study areas located downstream of Cathedral Rock, including Northpole Ridge, Thirtymile, and Lower John Day, are also exclusively accessed by the river. In fact, the greatest demand on public lands in the John Day basin is for recreational use on the river corridor. Thousands of boaters and anglers float this stretch of the river every year. The Cathedral Rock proposal will expand public ownership by over four miles along the John Day River and thus open up a dozen new river campsites to the public.

At the same time, the nearby Horse Heaven proposed wilderness area consolidates over 8,000 acres in a way that will provide clearly-marked boundaries and two trailheads for parking and associated camping areas. This will create additional hiking and hunting opportunities and do so in a way that minimizes conflicts between public and private lands. It is the combination of the Horse Heaven and Cathedral Rock areas – one that features roaded access and another that features river access - that makes this a winning proposal.

We strongly support the proposed equal-value land exchanges between the BLM and three neighboring land owners outlined in Section 4 of the Act. This consolidation will enhance the BLM's ability to effectively manage the area as wilderness and avoid conflicts between public and private land use. It provides access to over 7,000 acres of BLM lands previously inaccessible to the public, establishes new trailheads for camping, hiking and horseback riding, and secures access to backcountry campsites on nearly four miles the John Day Wild and Scenic River.

Despite our strong support, we are concerned that the language in Section 4 of the bill might be implemented in a way that does not meet the intent of the diverse stakeholders who have forged this effort. Specifically, there are four parcels adjacent to the Cathedral Rock area that are proposed for exchange from the BLM to Young Life and Derby-Smith Partners as part of the equal-value land exchanges. It is our concern that the BLM may ultimately choose to retain and develop the parcels in a way that compromises private land use and, instead of solving current problems of private lands trespass as envisioned in the Act, would simply exacerbate current problems. As such, we respectfully request that you include language in Section 4 of the bill that prioritizes the conveyance of these four parcels by the Secretary upon completion of the exchange. We would welcome the opportunity to work with your office on this important issue. It is our hope that such language will ensure that the implementation of the Act is consistent with the intent of the various supporters.

It is important to note that as part of the exchange proposal, Young Life has agreed to conservation easements on any lands found to have cultural values. As part of a long-term plan to protect and preserve cultural resources, Young Life has agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding for the inventory of and access to cultural resources. The easement language has been prepared in collaboration with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Society and the Prineville District BLM. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Reservation is the proposed easement grantee.

We believe that this proposal represents the kind of solutions that are possible when diverse stakeholders come together to solve problems. You need look no further than the numbers to see the public benefits of this proposal. Prior to the exchange, the public can access 9,112 acres of their land via roads or the John Day River. Through this proposal, public access will be expanded to 16,484 acres. That nearly doubles the amount of public access in the area. Likewise, instead of the public having access to small chunks or narrow swaths of land that are not currently usable for activities such as hunting and hiking, the public will have access to two large blocks of land, each totaling several thousand acres. This is a win for Oregonians and we hope you will lend your support.

Chairman Wyden, we thank you for introducing Senate Bill 2963. We strongly support the legislation and we look forward to working with your staff and the Committee to finalize a bill that will consolidate land management and permanently protect Cathedral Rock and Horse Heaven as Wilderness.

That concludes my testimony. Thank you for your consideration of this bill.