

Desert Ramblings

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CONSERVATION CORNER

Rep. Bob Smith in the House and Sen. Mark Hatfield in the Senate have introduced the Steens Mountain National Conservation Area Act. That bill, intended to provide protection to Steens Mountain, in fact falls far short of any real protection. On April 28, a group of Conservation Organizations introduced the Oregon High Desert Protection Act (OHDPA) at Desert Conference XIII at the Malheur Field Station. This and the accompanying article describe and analyze the two bills. ONDA feels the OHDPA bill is far superior to the NCA bill. We ask all ONDA members to contact their representatives in Congress and urge their support of the OHDPA bill.

Background

Steens Mountain is Oregon's desert jewel. Located in the Great Basin country of southeastern Oregon, Steens Mountain is one of the most ecologically significant, biologically diverse, and visually stunning basin and range landscapes in the entire Great Basin province (We refer members to *Desert Ramblings*, March-April, 1990.). Over 9,000 feet above sea level, the Steens towers 5,000 feet above the austere Alvord Desert. Its solitude and unlimited horizons have been an inspiration to generations of Oregonians and wayward travellers lucky enough to stumble upon the stunning displays of wildflowers, hot springs, hanging valleys, bighorn sheep, and redband trout. The Donner und Blitzen River, beginning in the hanging valleys of the high Steens, spills out of its canyon onto the valley floor creating the lifeblood for one of the major stopovers in the Pacific Northwest for migrating bird populations—the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Besides Steens Mountain, the Steens landscape includes the Pueblo Mountains to the south, the Alvord Desert to the east, and the Sheephead Mountains to the north of the Alvord Desert.

Existing Protection on the Steens

Efforts to recognize and protect the Steens began in 1971 when the BLM designated the Steens Mountain Recreation Lands. Today, the Recreation Lands encompass 194,000 acres. Several Research Natural Areas and Areas of Critical Environmental Concern have also been established. In 1988, Congress designated over 70 miles of the Donner und Blitzen River and its tributaries as Wild and Scenic Rivers, thus protecting the rivers from dams and other activities (but not grazing) that would harm their unique natural features.

Threats to the Steens

☛ The BLM as land manager

Many of the existing and potential problems are tied to the management limitations and philosophy of the existing land managing agency. The BLM land management tradition has been and continues to be the grazing, mining, and disposal of the public domain. It is a philosophy deeply embedded in the agency. Steens Mountain needs a responsible and sensitive steward who will be responsive to the needs of the public and the Steens. That agency is the National Park Service (NPS). The National Park Service was expressly established by Congress to protect the outstanding natural wonders of the United States for the enjoyment of the American public.

The NCA bill will allow BLM to continue to manage the Steens for commodity development.

☛ Livestock grazing

The greatest existing threat is continued livestock grazing. Cows and sheep destroy fish and wildlife habitat, riparian areas, and native plants. The BLM, to their credit, has removed cattle from selected areas, but these efforts have been meager. Federal subsidies in the form of below market livestock grazing fees and range "improvements" on public lands make it impossible for ranchers to change. Fear, momentum, and ignorance are impeding efforts to protect one of America's natural wonders.

(continued on pg. 3)



OHDP

The Oregon High Desert Protection Act (OHDP) is a comprehensive plan to preserve the wild heritage of southeast Oregon. The bill would:

- Establish a 500,000-acre Steens Mountain National Park and an adjoining 523,000-acre National Preserve which would be managed by the National Park Service (NPS). Hunting *would* be allowed in the Preserve.
- Establish the Jordan Craters, the Fort Rock Lava Beds, and the Lost Forest National Monuments, transferring 195,330 acres from BLM to the NPS.
- Preserve 5,064,086 acres of diverse BLM wildlands in 47 Wilderness Areas.
- Add 835 miles of rivers and streams to the National Wild & Scenic Rivers System.
- Establish a 57,500 acre Lake Abert Wildlife Refuge to protect critical habitat for over 500,000 shorebirds.
- Transfer 97,686 acres of the critical Warner Lakes wetlands to the Fish & Wildlife Service to be managed as part of Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge.
- Phase out livestock grazing on all public lands over a ten-year period (free grazing in the interim) in areas designated as National Park, National Preserve, National Monument, Wilderness Area, Wildlife Refuge, and Wild & Scenic River by this legislation.
- Direct the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, BLM, Forest Service, and NPS to establish additional National Recreation Trails.
- Allow continued use of over 19 million acres of Oregon rangeland for livestock grazing, mining, geothermal and oil and gas development, off-road vehicle and other motorized recreation, as well as other developmental land uses.

Why conservationists want a National Park and Preserve

To provide the best care for the the Steens, we must accomplish these goals:

- *Respect the ecological integrity of the land.*
- *Respect the needs and expectations of future generations.*

The Park would:

- Recognize the national significance of the Steens and provide management by an agency that specializes in land restoration, natural land preservation, and management of people.
- Pull together the management problems and opportunities under a single, comprehensive plan.
- Restore the landscape, including watersheds and riparian habitats.
- Restore the ecological processes and biological diversity of the landscape, including fire and predators.
- Expand the educational opportunities to increase awareness and sensitivity to our desert heritage.

Concerns over a national park designation generally fall into one of the following categories:

Hunting: Hunting would continue on lands designated as national preserve. Similar national preserves were created in Alaska where subsistence hunting is common. While hunting would be prohibited in areas designated as park, overall hunting quality would improve with the removal of livestock.

Solitude: We cannot (nor should we) "hide" the Steens from the public. The Steens belongs to the American public. Visitor use on the Steens has seen, and will continue to see, a steady increase regardless of what we do. Harney County is aggressively marketing the natural values of Steens Mountain to visitors to generate local income. There is little doubt that a national park designation will result in more visitors. Experience in other national parks, however, shows that 98% of park visitors use only 2% of the park lands. In fact, opportunities for primitive, undeveloped recreation will be enhanced by acquisition of private inholdings and closing of existing roads under National Park Service management. The NPS can maintain the character and quality of the natural landscape as demonstrated in Canyonlands National Park (in southern Utah) and North Cascades National Park (in northern Washington).

What You Can Do

Visit the high desert. Take some friends. Take pictures. Write about what you have seen and send those reports to the ONDA newsletter. Tell others about your experiences. Write a letter to your local newspaper.

Write a letter to your representatives in Congress in support of the *Oregon High Desert Protection Act*. Be sure to mention any areas that you have visited. For more information, contact ONDA.

(*Conservation Corner, continued from pg. 1*)

The NCA bill will allow livestock grazing to continue on the Steens.

☞ *Fragmented wilderness landscape*

In 1976, the Bureau of Land Management was directed by Congress to inventory all its lands to determine their eligibility and suitability for wilderness designation. Although nearly half of the Steens was inventoried as possessing wilderness characteristics, the BLM is only recommending a small percentage of the Steens to become wilderness. Wildlands were deemed unsuitable primarily to accommodate livestock, livestock developments, range "improvements," off-road vehicles, and commodity development (mining, geothermal, minerals etc.).

If BLM's wilderness recommendation, as described in the NCA bill, is passed, we will see a fragmented, wilderness landscape on the Steens. This will threaten the very integrity of wilderness on Steens by allowing BLM to promote its multiple-use philosophy on adjacent lands. A national park and preserve designation will pull the wilderness and non-wilderness lands together under one, comprehensive management plan that is in keeping with the management philosophy found in wilderness management.

The NCA bill will create a fragmented wilderness landscape on the Steens by leaving out half of all suitable lands for wilderness designation.

☞ *Geothermal development, oil and gas development, and Cyanide heap-leach mining*

Recent test drilling near Borax Lake south of Alvord Lake has shown commercial grade geothermal potential which threatens the endangered Borax Lake chub (see *Desert Ramblings*, May-June, 1990). Many wilderness study areas were deleted from further consideration as wilderness because of possibilities for future oil and gas developments. Over 65,000 mining claims have been filed in recent years in southeast Oregon.

The NCA bill could allow geothermal development, oil and gas development, and cyanide heap leach mining on the Steens.

☞ *Off-road vehicles and Snowmobiles*

ORVs continue to run unchecked, destroying native vegetation and displacing wildlife. BLM tried to open the high Steens to snowmobiles in spite of their own regulations closing the area due to its sensitive nature. Conservationists finally prevailed in keeping the area closed for now.

The NCA bill could allow off-road vehicles and snowmobiles on the Steens.

☞ *Overcrowding*

More people are "discovering" the Steens. BLM is underfunded to deal with increased visitor use and ill-equipped to accommodate the public.

The NCA bill will allow BLM to continue unbribed public use.

☞ *Private landholdings*

The Steens is dotted with abandoned homesteads that need to be acquired to enhance public access, wilderness management and landscape restoration. To their credit, BLM has made several key land acquisitions. Until we receive a national designation (and the commensurate budget), however, acquisition will continue at a snail's pace with many lost opportunities.

The NCA bill will only allow for minimal land acquisition on the Steens.

What's wrong with a National Conservation Area?

NCA's have a limited history with no organic act established by Congress prescribing a specific land ethic. From a management standpoint, can BLM shed its version of multiple-use, a management philosophy that has led to the desertification of almost half the intermountain west? With designation of a Steens NCA, the BLM will become a Jekyll and Hyde, trying to restore the landscape on the one hand while mining and grazing on the other.

In fact, an NCA may actually result in extensive damage to the Steens ecosystems along with further degradation in recreational and scenic values. It will give people a false sense of security, thinking that the Steens is now safe when in fact management philosophy or action hasn't changed.

From a community development and economic enhancement standpoint, a national conservation area does not have the same prestige or name familiarity common to our national parks. Without the name recognition inherent in a national park designation, the NCA will not meet the economic development expectations of Harney County which will be counting on an increase in visitor expenditures to help offset a sagging livestock and timber economy.

Oregonians can pass on to future generations the crown jewel of Oregon's wild desert lands by asking our Congressional delegation to create a Steens Mountain National Park and Preserve, a wilderness park that restores the wild landscape and subtle beauty of Oregon's high desert gem: Steens Mountain.

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MINING

by Mike Sequeira

The Board of Directors of ONDA has adopted the following policy regarding mining in Oregon:

- I. Whereas mining as governed by the 1872 hardrock mining act:
 - A. leads to a proliferation of mining claims in areas of the state that are sensitive to environmental impacts,
 - B. offers minimal protection of the natural environment,
 - C. shortchanges the American public by selling our public lands for \$2.50 to \$5.00 per acre,
 - D. does not provide long-term, sustainable economic benefits,

ONDA proposes the following goals:

- A. Replace the 1872 mining law with a law that preserves, protects, and restores public lands.
- B. Establish a strict framework to regulate the development and construction of mining operations, and reclamation of the land where mining operations occur in the state of Oregon.
- C. Prevent the development of cyanide or other heap-leach mining in the state of Oregon.

There are currently two mining bills being considered in the Oregon legislature: Senate Bill 1182 and House Bill 2244. ONDA presented testimony to the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources on SB 1182.

SB 1182 requires heap-leach operations to assume the social and environmental costs associated with their operations. As the development of cyanide heap-leach gold mines in other states have shown, inadequate state regulation has led to serious environmental damage. SB 1182 requires that before permits are issued, the cumulative impacts of a proposed operation be considered. Demands for precious water, especially after five years of drought are of critical concern. One proposed mine will require 1000 gallons of water per minute while running. Multiply that by the number of proposed mines (fifteen are currently in the planning stages with many more to come) and imagine the cumulative impact on those already stressed water resources. Certainly other resources will be taxed and without adequate state control, we believe that the long-term negative effects on the environment will greatly outweigh the short-term positive effects of temporary jobs.

Backfilling of pits is required in the coal-mining industry, but the hard-rock mining industry claims

such action would be impossible for them to undertake. For "impossible," read "costly." We find unconvincing the preposterous claims of the industry that "they move mountains," but cannot return the land to anything resembling its original condition. SB 1182 requires mine operations to backfill the huge pits they will excavate and to restore the site to its approximate original contour.

The effects of proposed cyanide heap-leach mining operations must be scrutinized from many perspectives. Oregon has a number of agencies with the structure and experience to perform these tasks. By including the Department of Environmental Quality, the Water Resources Department, the State Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Division of State Lands, and the State Department of Agriculture, SB 1182 gives all interested agencies an active role in the application process.

Most mines close ten to twelve years after opening. The impacts of an influx of people lured by the promise of high-paying jobs which bring with them dependence on the exploitation of our natural resources is a serious concern. SB 1182 includes the proviso that no state agency may issue a permit until it has determined that the proposed mine will have no detrimental effects on humans or the environment. Thus, not only does this bill concern itself with the long-term health of the land, but also with economic impacts.

SB 1182 requires that adequate bonding be posted before the start of mining operations. Removing any ceiling on the amount of the bond is an important feature, since mining operations are so large in scope and often expand over the years as more resources are discovered. The obvious limitation that the mining company cannot insure itself is a logical response to the history of some mining companies' practices in other states.

The Governor's Mining Working Group has produced a consensus on HB 2244, but a number of changes should be included that were left out of the final bill. In particular, reclamation including backfilling; no caps on bonding; mine operators should use the best available technology; and zero wildlife mortality have been suggested. In particular, if backfilling cannot be accomplished then no permit should be issued.

In closing, we believe that unless mining companies are forced to take a responsible position regarding the land and resources they wish to exploit for their profit, they should not be allowed to begin. In our opinion, SB 1182 and HB 2244 with the amended language address these issues in a thorough and rational manner. We urge members to write to their state legislators in support of these two bills.