

THE OWYHEE INITIATIVE: A COLLABORATIVE ASSAULT ON PUBLIC LANDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS

The Owyhee Initiative (OI) is an effort by Owyhee County and ranchers to increase local control, weaken environmental protections, garner new subsidies and preserve ranching on public lands in Idaho's spectacular Owyhee Canyonlands.

The County announced the OI collaboration in a 2001 Press Release, and laid down bedrock non-negotiable principles – the protection of livestock grazing as an economic use was paramount, those who oppose preserving livestock grazing were excluded, and water rights must be protected. Collaborating conservation groups are Idaho Conservation League, The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club who seek special designations (Wilderness, and Wild and Scenic River) in exchange for a complicated deal to preserve ranching through an exclusive oversight structure that will be imposed on all public lands in the County.

The OI proposal includes only 500,000 acres, less than one third of the 1.6 million acres of Wilderness-suitable lands in the County. OI Wilderness lands are primarily scattered cherry-picked parcels strung out along major canyons. Around 200,000 acres of significant and biologically diverse BLM WSAs, including lands critical to sage grouse, are to be released, or parts chopped off so that livestock projects can be built. OI negotiators are willingly releasing WSA lands that other groups have fought for 20 years to protect. Some WSRs segments will be included, but spectacular portions of the upper Bruneau system are not. The fractured OI Wilderness proposal includes around 500,000 acres, with 200,000 acres (40%) located within one mile of a road! Plus, there is far more to the OI than the meager and fractured Wilderness designation accompanied by WSA release.

Significant new precedents for public lands and Wilderness will be set by the OI. The OI legislation will impose an elaborate structure that will be used to elevate local control of all Owyhee lands, erode BLM powers, diminish public processes and weaken environmental laws. It will establish an *OI Board of Directors*, a permanent legislated elite Overlord Board that will oversee, monitor and implement the OI provisions. This Board will have permanent membership of six specific nonprofit corporations who have collaborated on the OI, plus the special interest and business groups involved in the collaboration. All 5 million acres of lands, including the 3.8 million acres of public lands in the County including Wilderness, are planned to be under its purview. Its membership will be: ICL, TWS, Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Owyhee Borderlands Trust (a rancher land bank), Owyhee Cattlemen, an eastern Owyhee rancher, Owyhee County, Idaho Outfitter's and Guides Association and People for the Owyhees (motorized use).

The Cattlemen have publicly stated that “**The Board will be King**”. ICL's John McCarthy describes this Overlord Board as “**a long-term stewardship group**”. ICL has also called it a “**cooperative land management structure**” and TNC termed it “a

collaborative **resource management body**”, further demonstrating assertions that the Board will be advisory only are pure malarkey.

A taxpayer funded *Peer Review Process* will be established to be conducted by livestock-friendly scientists who will review BLM decisions. Ranchers plan to use this to help kill grazing changes made by BLM.

OI legislation will also establish a *Science Center* to conduct livestock-friendly research, vegetation treatments and other projects. It will be run by the U of I with some TNC involvement, and overseen by the Board of Directors.

The County and ranchers have repeatedly said that the outcome of the OI will “resolve” the wilderness issue, they don’t want anybody coming back for more wilderness, and the OI will protect against any future Monument designation. Once the OI is enacted, their goals will be achieved as livestock projects are bulldozed and built, and land treatments in a million acres of undesignated roadless lands including released WSAs, fragment and destroy wild landscapes.

TNC has plans for grassbanks, grazing study and weed study as a cash cow for organizational aggrandizement in the aftermath of the OI. TNC abandons the use of best available science that irrefutably demonstrates the myriad and often irreversible harms that livestock grazing is causing to sagebrush-steppe systems, including arid Owyhee lands. Likewise TWS, ICL, and Sierra Club ignore livestock impacts, and express support for preserving ranching in the Owyhee. Questionable TNC practices now under national scrutiny may be replicated in the OI. Confusion has surrounded discussion of OI-related land exchanges. Large-scale land exchanges will likely occur in its aftermath.

The end result of OI legislation will be a structure that wields power. OI collaborators already talk about “weighing in” on even small-scale BLM decisions. The Board will be used to elevate special interests in land management processes, erode BLM powers and acquire taxpayer funding to further subsidize ranching, and conduct rancher-serving projects.

The OI Board of Directors will be rife with groups and individuals with conflicts of interests. A rancher land bank, TNC, individual OI rancher and consultant representatives all stand to profit. Corruption and cronyism are likely to abound.

The largest beneficiary of OI rancher preservation will be billionaire rancher J.R. Simplot, whose cattle graze a million acres of the Owyhee – more than 25% of all Owyhee public lands, including WSA areas to be released to development by the OI.

The OI is part of a long series of attempts by local interests to gain greater control of the West’s public lands – efforts in which ranching interests have played a prominent role as frontmen. Attempts to transfer federal lands to western states and ultimate privatization during the Eisenhower administration were revealed to the public by Bernard DeVoto, who understood the western mentality towards the federal government exemplified by

Owyhee County and the OI, i.e. “get out and give us more money”. In the Sagebrush Rebellion of the Reagan administration, rugged western ranchers like Wayne Hage were frontmen for big polluters. Wise Use followed in its track. It too was financed by ultra-right wingers and big polluters. Wise Use metastasized into County Supremacy. The agenda of the Sagebrush Rebels/Wise Users/County Supremacists is being carried out in the OI.

Wise User and County Supremacist Fred Grant is the head and organizer of the OI. Grant is the legal advisor to both Owyhee County and Stewards of the Range, a Wise Use group with direct ties to Wayne Hage, Helen Chenoweth, and a network of other right wing and Wise Use groups including Liberty Matters, the American Land Foundation, the Heritage Foundation and the Competitive Free Enterprise Institute. Grant is a fervent advocate of the Wise Use/County Supremacy agenda. He pioneered methods now used by rural counties to aggressively insert themselves into federal planning processes in order to warp the outcome to fit local control and commodity interests. Now, Wise Users are reinventing themselves as collaborationists, with a goal of elevating local control and commodity extraction from public lands, while gutting environmental protections and getting more subsidies.

The Quincy Library Group showed many enemies of the environment that collaboration and group processes were very useful ways to gain increased exploitation of public lands. In the late 90s, collaboration became legitimized through endless repetition, by industry, policy centers and pundits, as a way to “break the gridlock”, i.e. loosen environmental regulations, alter public processes, and give locals greater control of public lands.

Larry Craig, Helen Chenoweth, Mike Crapo, Mark Rey, Rebecca Watson, Lynn Scarlett – an array of Bush administration officials and right wing enemies of the environment – now extol and promote collaboration. They recognize its utility in undermining environmental laws, and breaking down a century of public lands protections. Collaborationists gain accolades from unquestioning media, snookered by the use of the terms “collaboration” and “consensus”. For Mike Crapo, collaboration and the OI provide green cover for an ambitious Senator with an atrocious environmental record.

Gale Norton’s powerful undersecretaries of the Interior Rebecca Watson and Lynn Scarlett have eagerly voiced the Bush administration’s support for OI-style collaboration, illustrating how well it fulfills the agenda of right wing-Wise Use interests in its ability to fracture public lands protections.

The OI and its entangling structure have serious implications for public lands and wilderness - implications that ICL, TWS and Sierra Club, in pursuit of some kind of wilderness designation in Idaho, have glossed over for more than two years. These include both the OI’s ecological costs stemming from projects and rancher preservation maneuvers that will fragment and destroy wildlife habitats, as well as the OI’s costs to future wild lands protection both in the Owyhee and everywhere else. Its innovations set dangerous precedents for future Wilderness processes. These costs have never been addressed by OI proponents.

The OI has been compared to the Steens Act, but it differs greatly. Steens did not put in place an elaborate, permanent oversight structure for public lands. Its board (the SMAC) was structured to be advisory, change membership, and was sanctioned under FACA thus having greater transparency. The Steens covers only a small fraction of the land area (425,000 acres) vs. the 5 million acres (with 3.8 million acres of public lands) that the OI includes. The Steens did not release BLM WSAs. In the Steens, BLM does science as usual with no special process for ranchers to undercut decisions, and no special Science Center to do rancher-friendly research and projects. 40% of the land area covered by the Steens Act is Wilderness, vs. less than 15% in the OI. The Steens designated 100,000 acres of cow-free Wilderness vs. perhaps 30,000 acres in the Owyhee. Big blocks of Wilderness were designated in the Steens, not stringer Wilderness following the showiest canyons as will occur in the OI.

The legislative language and an advisory board thought to be innocuous in the Steens Act have caused major problems for Oregon conservationists. Ranchers use the advisory board as a platform to push for management concessions, and are using it as an anti-wilderness weapon. Such problems will be magnified many-fold in the vastly greater land area of the Owyhee, especially with the strong financial interests of the conflicted OI Overlord Board and its cronies. Owyhee ranchers have a long history of beating down anyone who stands in their way. Rancher hardball tactics will quickly follow enactment of Owyhee legislation.

Many components of the OI mirror the Federal Lands Task Force proposal of the State of Idaho. Developed in the late 1990s under Ex-Bush Interior Solicitor Bill Myers guidance, the Task Force was an effort to set up stewardship groups, collaborative groups, Trusts and other groups and other mechanisms to gain control of public lands by the state of Idaho and local interests so that logging could be increased. Ironically, ICL and TWS lambasted and reviled the Task Force with its strong parallels to the OI – in the very same year that they chose to pursue the OI. Why? A Wilderness bait was dangled in front of them. Ranchers and enemies of the environment have learned to use Wilderness as a tool to gain huge concessions for public lands from pliant conservationists.

Lindsay Slater is Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson's legislative aide. Simpson and Slater hold the cards in the Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness deal in central Idaho that is being negotiated by ICL in closed door discussions. Slater worked for Oregon's Walden and had a key role in the Steens process. Slater's remarks on BWC illuminate the OI and other current Wilderness deals underway in the Interior West. Slater believes that stand alone Wilderness is done, that land disposal or other significant public lands giveaways and large concessions by environmentalists in exchange for wilderness designation are going to become the rule. In the BWC, the Simpson/Slater proposition gives public land to Custer County to sell, releases WSAs, and focuses on less biodiverse, higher elevation lands at the expense of critical lower elevation areas. Likely only half of the potential Wilderness acreage will be included in any BWC legislation.

Wilderness deals in progress like the OI, BWC and a Nevada Wilderness bill (with its land disposal for developers and a pipeline corridor for robbing water from desert springs and aquifers to transport to Las Vegas) are helping to kill stand-alone Wilderness, sacrifice other public lands, and set harmful new precedents for the Wilderness Act and all public lands. Conservationists who participate in these “quid pro quo” processes are helping to carry out the goals of enemies of public lands and the environment.

OI proponents have branded opponents of the OI as purists, firebrands, radicals. Yet a broad diversity of groups have opposed the OI - including the Idaho Wildlife Federation, which recognizes that the it “gives undue influence over the management of federal public land to county government”.

In reality, the “radical center” which OI collaborators have been praised for achieving, has at its core the agenda of Wise Use interests. This radical agenda, which seeks to dismantle public lands protections, is becoming legitimized through their deft use of collaboration.

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