

The Register-Guard

Opinion

Boice: Oregon Wildlands Act won't protect the Rogue

By Court Boice

Posted Jan 20, 2019 at 12:01 AM

The Rogue River is an Oregon treasure that is highly valued by residents and visitors alike. We all have an interest in assuring that it remains a place current and future generations can enjoy. Yet the proposed Oregon Wildlands Act is the wrong solution, at the wrong time, to protect the Rogue River, its tributaries, surrounding forests and wildlife.

Similarly to a recent guest opinion writer, I have operated businesses that depend on tourism on the Rogue River. But my interest in this iconic landscape goes far beyond business. I have spent most of my adult life living in the Rogue River Wilderness and have raised my sons on the river. I have an absolute devotion to protecting these public lands, yet the Oregon Wildlands Act could place this environment further at risk.

That's because the areas targeted for "protections" under the Oregon Wildlands Act are at high risk of catastrophic, stand-replacing wildfire. Provisions in this bill would make it more difficult for federal land agencies to access at-risk lands and remove excess vegetation that fuels deadly fires. There are already significant restrictions on land management activities in riparian zones on public lands. The Oregon Wildlands Act only serves to add another obstacle to needed fuels reduction.

In just the past two years, the 2017 Chetco Bar and 2018 Klondike fires burned a combined 366,000 acres — 610 square miles — within the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. The fires not only threatened nearby homes and businesses, they also inundated our communities in toxic smoke that harmed our most vulnerable populations.

Proponents of the Oregon Wildlands Act claim it will benefit Oregon's outdoor recreation economy. Some recreation businesses have not recovered from the loss of visitors from previous fire seasons. According to Travel Oregon, the 2017 fires and smoke reduced visitor spending by \$51.5 million and reduced worker payrolls by \$16 million. It is difficult to attract tourists to Southwest Oregon when we are suffering from the worst air quality in the world, as we experienced in the previous wildfire season.

There are many good reasons to reduce fire risks to protect the Rogue and its tributaries. Catastrophic wildfires can leave watersheds vulnerable to flooding and erosion, which can increase the accumulation of sediment in streams and rivers. Water quality can be

compromised for months and years after a fire is contained. Post-fire runoff negatively affects aquatic habitat as toxins such as mercury are released from burnt soils. Due to these impacts, federal land managers have sought to implement science-based vegetation management activities, such as thinning overstocked stands, to protect the ecological integrity of these natural resources.

A survey of federal land managers found management activities in riparian zones were successful at reducing hazardous fuels and enhancing wildlife habitat. The Oregon Wildlands Act would restrict common-sense opportunities to protect, restore and enhance the Rogue River and its tributaries.

By definition, wilderness designations and roadless areas keep people out of public lands and make it nearly impossible for firefighters to extinguish fires. That is why the Oregon Wildlands Act is tone-deaf to the concerns of many Southern Oregonians who want firefighting agencies to suppress fires quickly before they devastate our forests, fill our valleys with smoke, and threaten the safety of our rural communities.

Some have criticized Congressman Greg Walden for objecting to certain provisions of the Oregon Wildlands Act. Yet public lands belong to all of us, and Congressman Walden is correct to be concerned about land designations that limit fuel reduction activities and put the public and first responders at risk. After all, the fires that burned in the vicinity of the Rogue River funneled smoke into his district and harmed many of the citizens and closed businesses he represents.

The greatest risk to the iconic Rogue River we all love is catastrophic fire. Our congressional delegation should work together to reduce fire risks that threaten our public lands and hurt our economy.

Court Boice is a Curry County commissioner. Prior to his public service, he was an owner of Paradise Wilderness Lodge on the Rogue River, and a part-owner of Jerry's Rogue Jet Boats.

December 11, 2018

Senator Lisa Murkowski, Chair
Senate Energy & Natural Resources
Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Maria Cantwell, Ranking Member
Senate Energy & Natural Resources
Committee
304 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Congressman Rob Bishop, Chair
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Congressman Raul Grijalva, Ranking
Member
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairs Murkowski and Bishop and Ranking Members Cantwell and Grijalva:

As County Commissioners representing citizens impacted by catastrophic wildfires and smoke, we are writing to share our perspective on Oregon-related measures currently under consideration in a potential public lands package in the final days of the 115th United States Congress.

We are deeply concerned about reports from Washington D.C. that suggest a community wildfire protection bill, H.R.2075- Crooked River Ranch Fire Protection Act, will only be approved by Congress if Oregon-specific wilderness legislation, including S.1548 - Oregon Wildlands Act is included in a public lands package.

While we do not represent Crooked River Ranch, we understand the risks this community is facing. Many of our own communities are facing the threat of catastrophic wildfires from adjacent federal lands. Action must be taken by Congress to reduce these threats through active forest management.

If the federal government shares our urgency to address fire risks on federal lands, then passage of S.1548 as part of a public lands package would be a step in the wrong direction. At a time when thousands of acres of federally-owned land in Oregon are at immediate risk of severe fires, Congress should make it easier, not more difficult for federal land managers to conduct fuel reduction activities.

The citizens in each of our counties need relief from the wildfire and smoke that has negatively affected the quality of life and economy in our communities.

Jackson County experienced severe fires on both sides of the border it shares with California. The county endured several consecutive weeks of hazardous air quality that threatened the health of vulnerable citizens, leading to a strain on the local health care system. The county's tourism and recreation businesses suffered significant losses as visitors chose to go elsewhere, and as popular cultural and sports events were canceled.

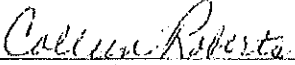
Josephine County also experienced similar impacts from several major fires in 2018, including the 175,000-acre Klondike Fire that prompted the evacuation of thousands of citizens. The 53,000-

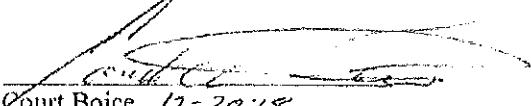
acre Taylor Creek also threatened our communities. This fire's intensity might have been far less, had the Bureau of Land Management implemented a planned vegetation management project on the site. Yet due to administrative protests and agency analysis paralysis, the project area was consumed by wildfire before work could begin.

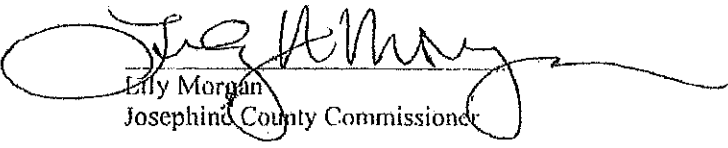
In Curry County, the entire community of Brookings was nearly destroyed in 2017 by the 191,000-acre Chetco Bar Fire. This fire, like many others in Oregon, gathered strength in a congressionally-designated wilderness area that repeatedly burns because it is choked with dead and dying trees. It is only a matter of time another large fire ignites on this wilderness area, and threatens lives and properties of citizens once again.

In closing, we do not oppose the passage of bipartisan public lands legislation. However, the inclusion of Oregon-specific wilderness legislation, including S.1548, sends the wrong message to those of us who are suffering from catastrophic wildfire, smoke and economic losses as a result of catastrophic wildfires. For this reason, we urge you to table this wilderness legislation and work together to pass measures that accelerate forest management activities on federal lands as soon as possible.

Sincerely,


Colleen Roberts
Jackson County Commissioner


Court Boice 12-20-18
Curry County Commissioner


Lily Morgan
Josephine County Commissioner

CC:
U.S. Senator Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley
Congressman Greg Walden
Congressman Peter DeFazio
Congressman Kurt Schrader

HERMAN E. BAERTSCHIGER, JR.
STATE SENATOR
DISTRICT 2



OREGON STATE SENATE
900 COURT ST NE
SALEM, OR 97301

Dear Honorable Members of Oregon's Congressional Delegation:

I am writing to express concerns regarding the potential expansion of Rogue River Wild & Scenic designations as proposed in the Oregon Wildlands Act. As you know this legislation is part of the broader public lands omnibus (S.1) pending in the 116th U.S. Congress.

As a wildlands fire manager with decades of experience working in the dry forests of Southern Oregon, I am concerned that expanding Wild & Scenic areas near the Rogue River will further restrict the ability of federal land managers to reduce fuels on these fire-prone lands. As a consequence, the changing and dangerous conditions on these lands will leave Grants Pass and other nearby communities vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires similar to those California experienced last year.

It is my understanding no maps have been made available of the proposed expansions, and little effort has been made to gauge the fire potential on lands proposed for these designations. Anecdotal evidence suggests many of the creeks and tributaries identified for these designations do not carry water for many months of the year. However, citizens in Southern Oregon have suffered from devastating fires that burned unchecked on designated wilderness lands. Fire modeling on these lands would indicate a very high potential for wind-driven catastrophic events in the future.

As you are likely aware, the U.S. Forest Service recently released a report identifying the communities at greatest risk of wildfire. The report indicated that more than 106,000 homes in Jackson and Josephine Counties are at risk, taking up 23 of the top 50 spots, with the community of Merlin near the Rogue River claiming the top spot.

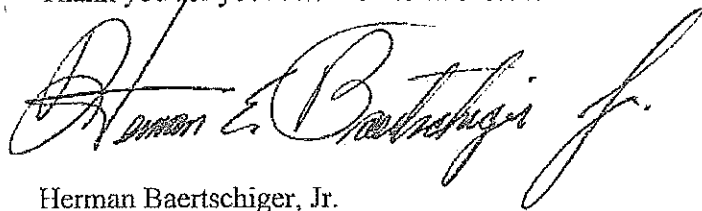
Last year residents of Merlin were threatened by the Taylor Creek Fire, which merged with other fires to form the massive 175,000 Klondike Fire. These lands were previously identified for fuel reduction treatments by the Bureau of Land Management. However, due to administrative protests, the area burned before the project could be implemented.

Federal agencies have demonstrated an inability to accelerate needed forest treatments, and past actions have demonstrated an unwillingness by some to attack fires before they can cause large-scale devastation. These should serve as a warning to state and federal policymakers who are interested in protecting our Southern Oregon communities.

Catastrophic wildfires in recent years have damaged our local economy, resulting in lost tourism activity and negative effects on recreation businesses dependent on the Rogue River. It is unclear what problems the proposed expansion of Rogue River Wild & Scenic is attempting to solve. But once again, fire models will indicate significant potential as fires are allowed to burn and spread unchecked on these designated lands.

I would strongly encourage you to withdraw the proposed Rogue Wild & Scenic expansion from both the Oregon Wildlands Act and the public lands omnibus, and work to develop comprehensive forest and fire management solutions that better meet the needs of our Southern Oregon communities.

Thank you for your attention to this issue.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Herman Baertschiger, Jr.", written in black ink.

Herman Baertschiger, Jr.

Oregon State Senate, District 2

Senate Republican Leader

GARY LEIF
STATE REPRESENTATIVE
District 2
Douglas, Jackson, & Josephine Counties



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

December 12, 2018

Senator Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC, 20510

Dear Senator Wyden:

Southwest Oregon is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of catastrophic wildfire. It is now an annual occurrence for wildfire smoke to fill our valleys, threatening the health of our citizens and leading to the cancellation of events that bring visitors to our region. Southwest Oregon's reputation as a great place to reside, work and play is in jeopardy as more people are deciding to live elsewhere.

As our U.S. Senator you have visited our region many times and are aware of the impacts. However, respectfully, your insistence on passing the Oregon Wildlands Act and other related wilderness legislation sends the wrong message to our constituents as they look to elected officials for solutions that help break this yearly cycle of catastrophic wildfire and smoke.

The federal government administers the majority of land in my legislative district and throughout Southwest Oregon. Our constituents spend considerable time working and recreating on public lands, and they understand the dangerous conditions on our fire-prone national forests, O&C lands and designated wilderness areas. They are asking for better management of these forests to reduce heavy fuels and to thin overstocked stands.

During this time is critical that we give federal land managers the tools, resources and flexibility to do more work on the ground, more quickly. Arbitrary land designations and additional regulations on forest management activities only make this task more difficult. It is not a coincidence that the 175,000-acre Klondike Fire this year ignited and spread through a designated wilderness area.

I share your desire to protect Oregon's natural treasures, yet creating and expanding wilderness areas, and creating new recreation areas, are not going to bring more visitors to our region especially during our now-annual wildfire and smoke season. Recreation businesses that depend on the Rogue River have been severely impacted by the fires. The best way to protect our natural treasures, our tourism economy and our citizens' health and well-being is to ensure federal lands are appropriately managed and the risks are mitigated.

I appreciate your service to Oregon and stand ready to assist you in efforts to improve the management of federal lands. As past Douglas County Commissioner and now State Representative, my district is home to the "timber capital of the world," and our forest sector is willing to partner with the federal government to make needed forest treatments both economical and effective. To spare our citizens more summers of wildfire and smoke, we must take action as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Gary Leif
State Representative HD2
CC: U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley
Congressman Greg Walden
Congressman Peter DeFazio