

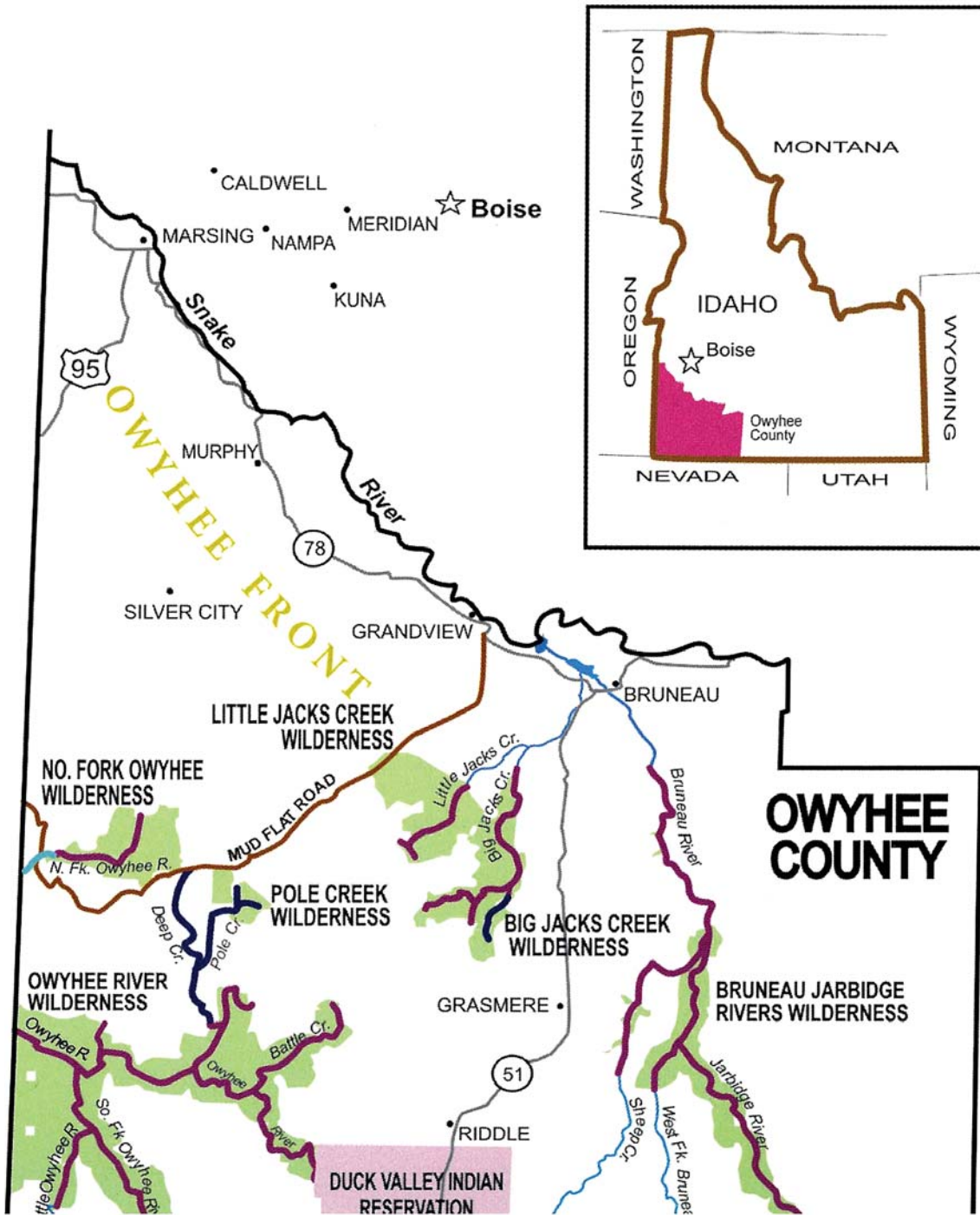
America's New Wilderness
Owyhee Canyonlands

Benefits of Retiring Grazing in Key Landscapes



Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers OWYHEE CANYONLANDS

designated March 30, 2009



Benefits of Non-Grazing Areas in the Owyhee Landscape

On March 30, 2009 President Barack Obama signed into law the Omnibus Public Lands Bill, thereby designating 517,000 acres of Wilderness in south-west Idaho's Owyhee County.

These areas, which range from sheer-walled river canyons to sagebrush plateaus to juniper forests containing some of Idaho's oldest trees, are the first designated BLM wilderness areas in Idaho.

The high desert landscape protected by Wilderness designation complement Idaho's existing National Forest Wilderness areas of old growth forests and glaciated mountains.

Wilderness in Owyhee County permanently protects landscapes and ecosystems that are currently not represented in Wilderness areas anywhere else in the Columbia Basin.

While grazing is permitted to continue on Wilderness lands, we have an opportunity to permanently remove livestock grazing on 54,000 acres of Wilderness and reduce grazing on 74,000 Wilderness acres in the Owyhees.

Ranchers are also willing to reduce grazing on 238,000 acres of land adjacent to the Wilderness, for a total of permanent removal and reduction in livestock grazing of 366,000 acres in and around Wilderness in Owyhee County. Several ranchers who currently hold grazing permits are willing to relinquish these permits, with compensation.

Livestock-free portions of Wilderness areas is desirable from several standpoints. From a conservation perspective, retiring these offered grazing permits will create the largest ungrazed areas in Owyhee County.



While the bottoms of the river canyons themselves were administratively closed to grazing years ago by the BLM, the designated Wilderness areas are largely rolling sagebrush and bunchgrass plateaus. These plateaus contain some of the best remaining native grassland and vegetation communities in Owyhee County. Closing them to livestock grazing through the permanent retirement of existing grazing permits will:

- Protect these areas from the risk of overgrazing and greatly reduce the risk of invasion by exotic weeds, and will compliment the closures of the river corridors themselves.
- Eliminate livestock trespassing into the river corridors, as livestock grazing on the adjacent plateaus do wander down into the canyons.
- Enable managers to compare these lands to other grazed areas, enabling them to better evaluate the effects of livestock grazing on these sagebrush ecosystems.



- Enhance the recreational desirability of these areas, as it is currently difficult for recreationists to find areas in Owyhee County that are free from livestock.
- Enhance the wildlife values for these areas by eliminating competition for forage, the likelihood for disturbance during times of the year when wildlife are particularly sensitive – such as when bighorn sheep lambs are born – and again reduce the risk of invasive exotic weeds out-competing native vegetation.

North Fork Owyhee Wilderness

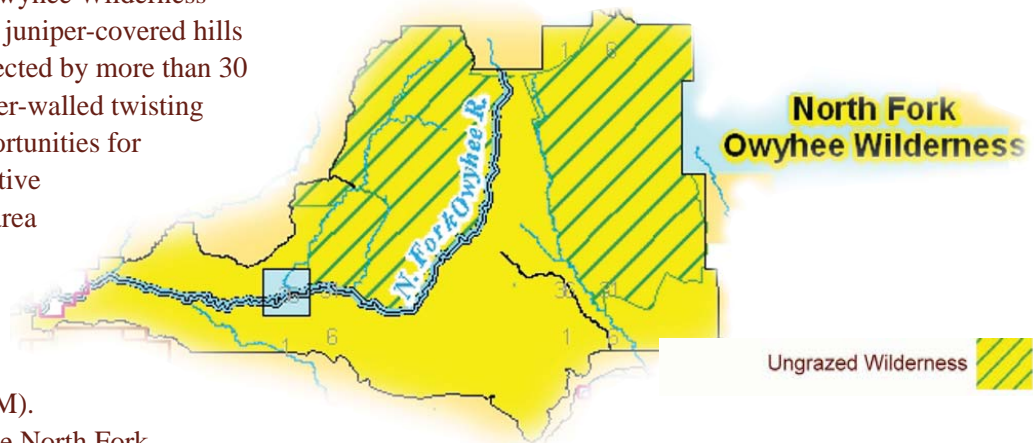
Wilderness Acres Designated: 43,000

Ungrazed Wilderness: 24,000

The North Fork Owyhee Wilderness consists of rugged juniper-covered hills and a plateau dissected by more than 30 miles of deep, sheer-walled twisting canyons. The opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in this area are outstanding, and have been so rated by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

Fifteen miles of the North Fork Owyhee River, which contains healthy native populations of redband trout, have been designated as Wild and Scenic.

According to BLM assessments, the North Fork Owyhee Wilderness has the highest quality wilderness characteristics of the areas evaluated in the Owyhee wilderness environmental analysis. The area is the most scenic and has the most topographic and vegetative diversity. The North Fork Owyhee Wilderness enhances the diversity of the National Wilderness Preservation System by the inclusion of large tracts of old growth juniper forests within the



sagebrush steppe ecosystem. These juniper forests are among some of the oldest forests in Idaho. The BLM concluded that “wilderness designation would provide long-term protection to an exceptionally scenic area with outstanding wilderness values.”

The BLM also found that long-term protection of multiple use resource values in the North Fork Owyhee area is dependant upon restoring good ecological conditions to plant communities, and that “continued livestock grazing would not allow natural vegetation patterns to exist.”

Owyhee River Wilderness

Wilderness Acres Designated: 267,000

Ungrazed Wilderness: 20,000

This area, known as Dickshooter Ridge, is a sagebrush plateau bordered by the East Fork Owyhee River, Battle and Deep Creek canyons. An existing dirt road is closed by Wilderness designation, creating one of the most isolated Wilderness tracts in Owyhee County.

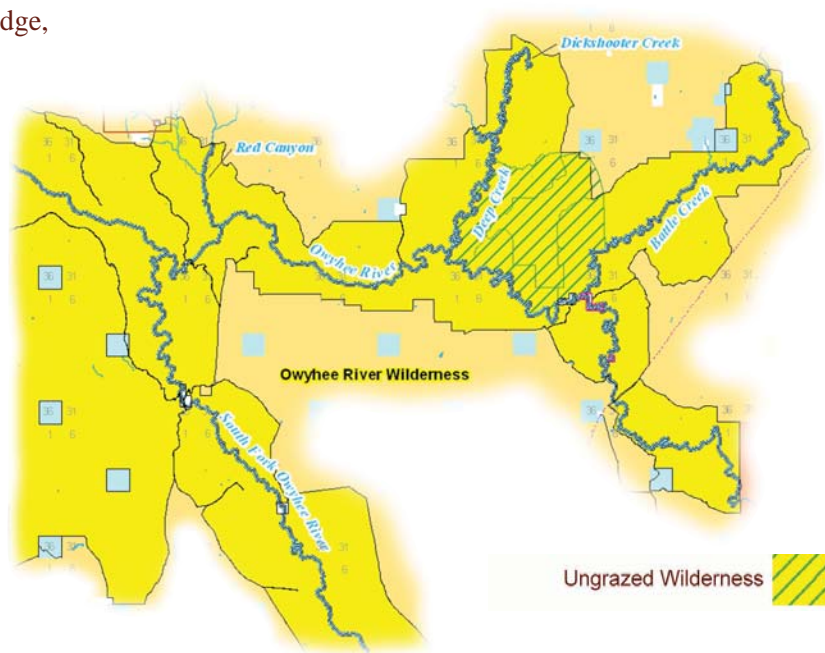
Dickshooter Ridge is a flat to rolling plateau dominated by sagebrush, bitterbrush, and native bunchgrasses. The plateau connects the deep, sheer-walled river canyons of Battle and Deep Creeks, both of which are now designated Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Dickshooter Ridge is bighorn sheep habitat, providing critical lambing habitat for this iconic species. It also provides critical sage grouse habitat.

BLM calls bighorn sheep in Owyhee County “a species dependent upon wildlands habitat for their survival.”

Bighorn sheep have been found to actively avoid habitats occupied by cattle. Removing livestock from this area removes any potential conflicts with bighorn sheep using the plateau as a landscape linkage between the Battle and Deep Creek canyons and with lambing areas, creating an important, diverse sanctuary for bighorn sheep in Owyhee County.

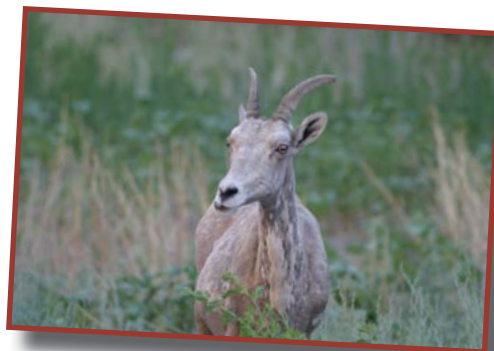
Removing livestock also helps ensure plateau areas in Owyhee County are



available to help recover and stabilize sage grouse populations.

The BLM has rated the area as outstanding for solitude and primitive recreation potential. Hiking on the plateaus along the rims of the canyons offers spectacular views of the colorful, sheer cliffs with their fractured, blocky rock monoliths tinted with brilliant green, yellow, and orange microflora. The monoliths are frequently topped with a multitude of diversely eroded rock spires. From the

high points on the plateau one can view hundreds to thousands of square miles of open spaces, stretching from Steens Mountain in Oregon to Juniper Mountain in Idaho south to the Bull Run Mountains of Nevada. These vast open spaces symbolize the American West in the minds of many people.



Big and Little Jacks Creek Wildernesses

Wilderness Acres Designated: 104,000

Ungrazed Wilderness: 10,000

Reduced Grazed Wilderness: 29,000

Along with a large section of ungrazed Wilderness in the Big and Little Jacks Creek Wilderness, an additional 80,800 acres adjacent to these areas will have reduced grazing.

The Big and Little Jacks Creek Wilderness complex is characterized by the major canyon systems of Big and Little Jacks Creeks, Shoofly Creek and the connecting sagebrush and grassland plateaus between.

Wilderness designation of this area adds thousands of acres of sagebrush and grass-covered plateaus in good to excellent ecological condition into the National Wilderness Preservation System, according to the BLM. Protecting these sagebrush and grassland plateaus that are in good to excellent ecological condition will benefit tremendously from the removal and reduction of livestock grazing.

The sagebrush/grassland plateaus provide landscape connectivity for bighorn sheep between the canyon complexes of Little Jacks, Big Jacks, and Shoofly Creeks. In its analysis, BLM concluded that wilderness designation in this area “would provide long-term protection to ... bighorn sheep habitat and to an exceptionally scenic area with outstanding wilderness values.” The BLM documented that “because of their relative intolerance to the presence of humans, (bighorn) sheep are a wildlands—or wilderness—dependant species.”

These sagebrush/grassland plateaus also provide ideal habitat for sage grouse and sage grouse recovery opportunities, particularly with the elimination and/or reduction of livestock grazing.



Big and Little Jacks Creek Wildernesses are the closest designated Wilderness areas to the Treasure Valley, the most populated region in Idaho. Not only does designated Wilderness offer an easily-accessible wilderness recreation experience to many, it will also offer the closest grazing-reduced sagebrush ecosystem to recreationists.

The plateaus in this new wilderness offer outstanding opportunities for solitude due to their spaciousness, remoteness and views of canyon chasms and surrounding hills. The BLM called these

plateaus “near-pristine sagebrush steppe grasslands, ... dominated by waving perennial grasses.” The sagebrush/grassland plateaus separating Little and Big Jacks Creeks are a growing attraction in this country. According to the BLM, “(i)n these areas, stands of perennial grasses

have obscured the usually dominant sagebrush. These remnant grasslands contrast to the sagebrush-dominated plains that characterize most of the high desert throughout the west.”

Elimination and reduction of livestock grazing in these plateaus will go a long way to ensuring that these grasslands are protected and sustained.

On the plateau between Shoofly and Little Jacks Creek canyons where grazing will be reduced by two-thirds are the remnants of a prehistoric game drive where pronghorn antelope were hunted by bands of Native Americans. This site has been proposed for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.



Summary

No ungrazed Wilderness will occur without the pro-active, voluntary donation of the grazing permit by the rancher. No rancher is being forced into this program. Livestock grazing has always been allowed in designated Wilderness areas; in fact Congress has gone to some lengths to instruct managers that livestock grazing should continue as it was generally practiced in an area prior to its designation as wilderness. Ranchers within the identified areas of the Owyhee Public Lands Management Act Wilderness designations can continue to graze or voluntarily offer up their permits and be compensated by third party dollars.

Ranchers with permits in these identified areas have already indicated their willingness to partici-

pate in this program of voluntary donations. In all cases, compensation for these permits will enable affected ranchers to consolidate and increase the efficiency of their operations. These ranchers cannot afford to simply voluntarily give up these permits without some kind of compensation. And the BLM, without the explicit language in the Owyhee Public Lands Management Act, cannot permanently retire an area from grazing. The legislation set the stage for those ranchers choosing to voluntarily donate their permits to do so, with compensation from a third party, and for the BLM to have the authority to permanently close these affected areas to livestock grazing.



For more information on how to help with grazing retirement funding for the Owyhee Wilderness Areas, please contact: Craig Gehrke at 208.343.8153 ext. 2.

For more information on the Owyhee Initiative, visit
www.owyheeinitiative.org

For more information about the Owyhee Public Lands Management Act and maps of the designated Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers, go to:
http://crapo.senate.gov/issues/owyhee_initiative.cfm

IMAGE CREDITS

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SOCIETY

Owyhee Canyonlands: Benefits of Retiring Grazing in Key Landscapes Briefing Booklet, © May 2009. Written by Craig Gehrke, Idaho Regional Director. Design by Brenda Bielke, Conservation Associate. For more information, contact us at: 208.343.8153 | 208.343.8184 fax or craig_gehrke@twc.org. The Wilderness Society works to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places.