

Testimony

H.R.10082

Oregon Owyhee Wilderness and Community Protection Act United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources

Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Legislative Hearing

Tuesday, November 19, 2024

Good afternoon. My name is Elias Eiguren. I appear here today in support of H.R.10082, with the understanding that this bill is a work in progress, subject to further change and negotiation. I am a fourth generation cattle rancher from Arock, OR, a small ranching community in southern Malheur County, 150 miles southwest of Boise, ID. My great grandfather, Pascual Eiguren, left the Basque Country in Spain at the age of twelve to meet his uncle who was already in the Owyhee region. Like most of the Basque people who have immigrated to America, my great grandfather left to escape poverty and hunger. He purchased the “Sheep Ranch” in 1914; where, 110 years later, my wife and I ranch in partnership with my parents, continuing to raise livestock and our four children who will hopefully be the next generation of agriculturalists that will feed our great nation.

Most ranching families in this area have a similar story. An ancestor fleeing from poverty and deprivation in another country to find a better life in the high desert of SouthEastern Oregon, which has led to a multi-generational agricultural operation. Achieving a history like this is a result of hard work and grit, but also requires a long term vision. Had our ancestors made poor decisions based on short term gain, this unforgiving landscape would have sent us elsewhere long ago.

Malheur County consists of approximately six million acres of land. Upwards of four million acres (two out of three) are federally managed. Agriculture is our economic foundation, with crop production in the north end and cattle production throughout. The thirty thousand souls who live there are considered the poorest per capita by county in the state.

The Owyhee Basin Stewardship Coalition (OBSC) was formed in early 2016 as a grassroots response in the county to the threat of a national monument designation championed by eNGO’s and an outdoor apparel company that would consist of 2.5 million acres. The OBSC consists of ranchers, sportsmen, business and mining interests who all live, work and recreate in Malheur County. I am one of the executive board members for the OBSC and also serve as treasurer. Our campaign of “No Monument, without a Vote of Congress” was heard throughout our state and nation. We believe that a monument designation would injure our local economy by restricting

or eliminating current agricultural practices on these lands, as well as overwhelm this landscape with tourists and recreationalists in detrimental ways. Thankfully, President Obama left office choosing not to designate the proposed monument.

The main concerns of our membership are land health and certainty for our local economy. To this end, we are asking for protection from a monument designation (which would attract greater attention from the neighboring Treasure Valley which has exploded beyond 850,000 people in recent years), increased flexibility for the BLM in regard to grazing management to mitigate damage from wildfire and invasive weeds, sufficient transportation/access, and Wilderness Study Area resolution with released land returning to multiple use. The OBSC approached our senior senator, Ron Wyden, to lead a collaborative effort to find a legislative solution to federal land concerns in our county. Meetings began in spring of 2019 under the Senator's guidance, and have resulted in S.B. 1890. The OBSC is grateful for the effort and leadership put forth by Senator Wyden and his staff.

We are also thankful to Congressman Bentz for constructing the bill before us today, based on the OBSC's direction, hours of negotiations between Senator Wyden's office and Congressman Bentz's office, and the concerns of members of this committee. Movement of this bill will hopefully be the next step in a grand compromise, intended to address the concerns of those who call the Owyhee region home and those who wish to visit.

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