

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Federal Lands  
Legislative Hearing  
Tuesday, November 19, 2024

Chair Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Our organizations represent hundreds of thousands of hunters and anglers nationwide and in Oregon who share in a collective belief that healthy public lands are essential to sustaining our hunting and angling traditions. On behalf of these hunters and anglers, we write to express our opposition to H.R. 10082, the Oregon Owyhee Wilderness and Community Protection Act.

We believe the Owyhee Canyonlands is a landscape that should be safeguarded for future generations of American sportsmen and women. The Owyhee is an integral part of the sagebrush steppe landscape that supports more than 350 species of fish and wildlife, including California bighorn sheep, pronghorn, elk, mule deer, sage grouse, brown trout, and native interior redband trout. Our organizations support the multiple uses of public land in this region and recognize good stewardship means sustainable ranching, fish and wildlife habitat management, public access and meaningful resource conservation.

In 2019, Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley first introduced the Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act – a bill that would designate 1.1 million acres of the Owyhee as wilderness, establish a flexible, science-based grazing and monitoring program, create and fund a “Malheur CEO Group” made up of multiple stakeholders, and transfer 30,000 acres of public and tribal land into federal trust for the Burns Paiute Tribe. Part of this five-year legislative process included the founding of a “legislative table team” made up of tribes, local ranchers, environmental organizations, and hook and bullet groups. These stakeholders, along with Senator Wyden, reached consensus and then developed a refined version of the Owyhee Act. In June of 2023, Senator Wyden reintroduced the legislation as Senate Bill 1890.

S. 1890 provides a balanced management approach that protects and preserves exceptional fish and wildlife habitat as well as the high quality of life and economic benefits the area provides to local communities, Tribes, and ranchers. It would also honor the rights of Tribal Nations, recognize the area’s rich fishing and hunting heritage, and allow multiple-use activities, like livestock grazing, to continue.

While we appreciate that Congressman Bentz is involved in this endeavor, our organizations are concerned that H.R. 10082 would compromise key components of S. 1890 that were agreed to by local community members, hunters and anglers, ranchers, the Burns Paiute Tribe and conservation groups. H.R. 10082 would undermine the protection of fish and wildlife habitat and set poor precedents for management of our public lands. Some examples of this include:

- Elimination of the definition of “long-term ecological health”, a principle agreed upon by stakeholders to ensure sustainable and responsible management of federal public lands in Malheur County. (Section 2)

- Removal of the livestock grazing monitoring program that would allow ranchers, the Bureau of Land Management, and members of the public to make adaptive management decisions to livestock grazing in Malheur County. H.R. 10082 ultimately makes the flexible grazing program permanent by eliminating the requirement for Secretarial review, evaluation, and possible adjustment of the program after 10 years. (Section 3)
- Changes the makeup of the “Malheur CEO Group” from broad representation of community members, businesses, ranchers, Tribes, environmental groups, and hunters and anglers to a smaller group weighed in favor of industry. (Section 4)
- Overrides the community-driven Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan Amendment adopted in 2024 by preventing conservation management on over 3.5 million acres of public lands and eliminating protections on 1.6 million acres of the most ecologically important public lands. (Section 5)
- Undermines the Wilderness Act by promoting the use of heavy equipment in Wilderness areas. (Section 5)
- Unilaterally creates the precedent for permanent release of wilderness study areas and prevents wilderness review of all federal lands in Malheur County and requires said lands to be managed for non-wilderness values. (Section 5)

We thank you for the opportunity to share our concerns about H.R. 10082 and respectfully ask the Committee to vote “NO” on this bill should it advance. We encourage Congress to pass Senator Wyden’s locally driven legislation, S. 1890. As one of the premier destinations for sportsmen and women in Oregon, the Owyhee Canyonlands demand permanent protection of our hunting, angling, and outdoor recreation heritage. We remain committed to working with Congress to ensure that the Owyhee Canyonlands and the region’s fish and wildlife habitat are protected this year.

Sincerely,

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers

National Wildlife Federation

Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association

Trout Unlimited