



From left to right, Craig Gehrke, Idaho Director, The Wilderness Society, Dennis Stanford, Owyhee Borderlands Trust and Rancher, Brenda Richards, Chair, Owyhee Initiative Board of Directors and Rancher, and Lou Lunte, State Deputy Director, The Nature Conservancy.

## ALMOST 20 YEARS LATER: OWYHEE INITIATIVE PARTNERS STILL AT THE TABLE, STILL COLLABORATING

*A motivated and diverse group of ranchers and environmentalists came together in the early 2000s to balance socioeconomic and environmental goals in the Owyhees. Their efforts led to the landmark Owyhee Initiative and set a high standard for collaboration in the West. Not done yet, they're still at it.*

By Steve Stuebner

In 2009, the Owyhee Initiative collaborative group saw the fulfillment of a major milestone, when Senator Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, spearheaded legislation to protect 517,000 acres of wilderness, 316 miles of National Wild and Scenic Rivers, closure of 200 miles of motorized trails in candidate wilderness areas, better

enforcement of off-highway vehicle use in Owyhee County and increased protection of Shoshone-Paiute cultural resources.

The legislation also released 200,000 acres of wilderness study lands for multiple use management and designated 4WD access routes or cherry-stem roads into the new wilderness areas. The bill was signed into federal law in March 2009

by former President Barack Obama.

For Bruneau Rancher Chris Black, who represents the Owyhee and Bruneau Soil and Water Conservation Districts in the Owyhee Initiative collaborative group, the work was just beginning after the legislation passed. A large part of Black's summer range for his cattle was out on Dickshooter Ridge, an area of vast

grasslands on a basalt plateau above the junction of Deep Creek, Battle Creek and the East Fork of the Owyhee River – all of which were designated as wilderness in the bill.

Black's family had been grazing on Dickshooter Ridge for decades.

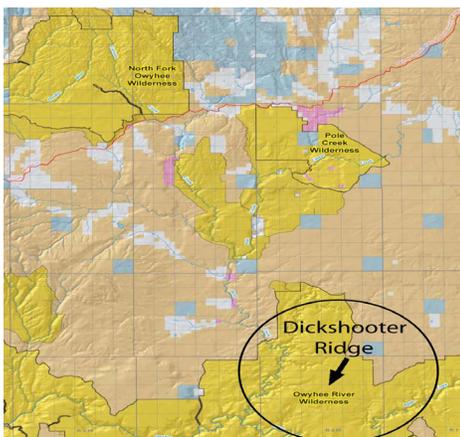
"Dickshooter Ridge is way out there," Black says. "There's no place as inaccessible as that. It's got mountain sheep, deer and elk, antelope, sage grouse, all of these canyons and solitude. It's kind of like the last of the wide open West. No fences anywhere. Just wide open spaces and holistic management."

Black had been managing his lands under holistic management principles since the early 1990s. In 2008, Black received the BLM National Rangeland Stewardship Award for excellent land management. His family had taken good care of the grasslands on Dickshooter Ridge, and conservation groups wanted to include the plateau as part of the wilderness package.

"Instead of just managing for cows, or just for wildlife, you're managing for the whole. You're managing for the whole ecosystem's good," Black says.

Black divided the Dickshooter Ridge area into 20 different non-fenced grazing areas to ensure that cattle would rotate in a way to have the rest and regeneration period after grazing. His management regime called for grazing each area for 5-12 days each, and then moving on to the next one. "I like to keep the cattle moving all the time," he says.

To stay on top of the grazing management system, Black herded cattle on horseback and also on a motorbike. The country was so tough on his horses and distances



Chris Black, gathering cattle on Dickshooter Ridge.

traveled so great that he needed both alternatives to keep cattle together because controlling the timing of grazing of cattle is the basis of sound management. He would rotate 7 horses for 1.5 months while herding cattle, wear them out, and then bring in another 7 horses to finish the grazing season.

"The distance is so great from my cow camp off the Mud Flat Road to the Owyhee River," Black says. "It's 32 miles with no internal fences within our area of use. I have a cow camp in Dickshooter as well, about 12 miles from Owyhee River and it takes 2.5 hours to commute to work the cattle on horseback one-way. I was going through a lot of horses, and that is really rough country, so we used a combination of motorbikes, 4-wheelers and horses to move the cattle."

Without a combination, with motorized herding it is just too difficult to keep cattle in those grazing areas, he said.

After the Owyhee Initiative legislation passed, the whole Dickshooter Ridge area was designated as wilderness, along with the Deep Creek, Battle Creek and East Fork Owyhee River canyons. That set up a potential conflict with Black's motorized herding program, because typically, no motors are allowed in federally designated wilderness areas under the Wilderness

Act, unless an exception is written into the law.

For example, small airplanes are allowed to land in many airstrips in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness and jet boats are allowed on the Salmon River in the wilderness section as it flows through the core of Central Idaho and "the Frank."



But no exception for Black's motorized herding was written into the bill. It was contained in the agreement that the O.I. group all signed and agreed to, and congressional staffers promised that the motorized herding provision could be taken care of by the BLM through its ad-

ministration of the wilderness.

In the 10 years since the O.I. was passed, that provision did not stick.

“After years of trying, we hit an impasse with the motorized herding,” says Lou Lunte, deputy director of The Nature Conservancy in Idaho. “Chris has got to have the tools to manage his cattle appropriately. The motorized herding was lost as an unintended consequence, and we tried really hard to get it back.”

National BLM staff in Washington D.C. rewrote the wilderness regulations after the O.I. legislation passed, and “they went in there and changed the policy manual so it wouldn’t be allowed,” Lunte says.

Now, the group is working on adjusting a 700-acre mistake in the wilderness boundary to allow Black to install about 12 miles of fencing outside of the wilderness in the Dickshooter Ridge area to provide space for him to manage his cattle over the long-term.

When the new BLM management plan for the Owyhee wilderness came out in 2014, the elimination of the motorized herding provision became apparent, says Brenda Richards, an Owyhee County rancher, former Owyhee County Treasurer, and chair of the O.I. “That was quite a blow to all of us because every O.I. member had agreed to that. It was unanimous.”

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*“The relationships we created through that collaborative environment we had in the O.I. are indeed transcending the group, and we’re seeing it come to fruition in other venues.”*

*Lou Lunte, The Nature Conservancy*

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That everyone in the O.I. tried to back up the original agreement when the change in BLM wilderness regulations occurred speaks to the strength of the group,



*Bruneau Canyon overlook, courtesy of Visit Idaho*

Richards says. “One thing that has been amazing is that there has been no wavering on anyone’s part. The whole group has been standing strong on the original agreement,” she said.

Black agrees and appreciates everyone’s support. “If it takes fencing to make things work, we’ll find a way to manage the land and manage it well,” he said.

After the conservation groups in the O.I. achieved their objectives with wilderness areas and wild and scenic rivers protected in 2009, they could have walked away, Black says. “They’re still there at the table. These guys are true to their word.”

#### **How it started**

The O.I. group was formed in 2001 when former Owyhee County Commissioner Hal Tolmie, and Fred Grant, advisor to Owyhee County, suggested that it might be smarter for Owyhee County people to try to work with conservation groups at a local level after the Clinton administration and former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt came very close to creating an Owyhee National Monument prior to Clinton leaving office.

“That’s what sparked it at the beginning,” Black says. “Fred was good at bringing people together from diverse interests.”

Richards also has been a great leader in working with groups with a variety of interests, he notes.

The O.I. group met on a regular basis for 8 years to see the legislation come to fruition. The first major milestone was when the group agreed to a detailed agreement on wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, the release of wilderness study areas for multiple use management, management of off-highway vehicles and protection of Native American cultural sites, among other issues. That agreement was signed in 2006. Then it took three years for Crapo to get the legislation through Congress.

Part of the underpinning of the agreement was that all of the O.I. participants agreed to specific goals, including a recognition that the economic vitality and stability of ranching would have to be maintained, and there were goals on ecological and social sustainability for Owyhee County lands and people.

Some call that a triple bottom line – supporting the sustainability of economic interests, social interests and ecological interests – to ensure a positive long-term future.

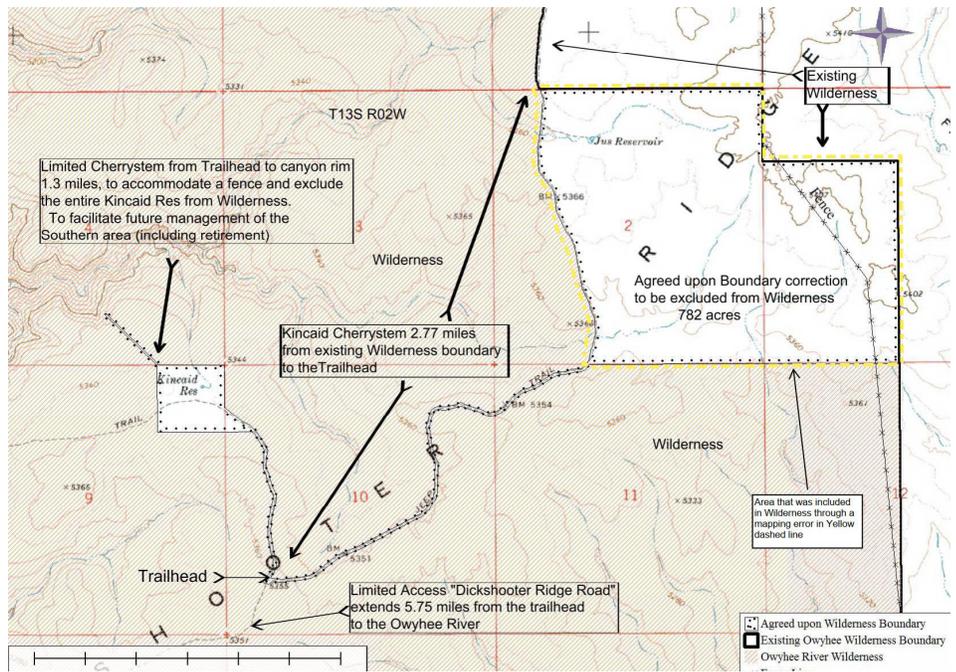
Those have been key guiding principles all along, Richards says.

Groups that have been participating in the O.I. include the Owyhee County Commissioners, Owyhee County Cattlemen’s Association, The Wilderness Society, Idaho Conservation League, Owyhee Farm Bureau, The Nature Conservancy, Idaho Rivers United, Sierra Club, Backcountry Horsemen of Idaho, Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association and Southwest Idaho Desert Racing Association, Borderland Trust, Owyhee and Bruneau River Soil & Water Conservation Districts.

After the legislation passed, the O.I. group was honored by the City Club of Boise in 2011 with the Dottie and Ed Stimpson Award for Civic Engagement. The Stimpsons dedicated the award to groups that would work on solving difficult problems with civil dialogue and keeping an open mind.

**Implementation of O.I. Agreement and legislation**

After the legislation passed, the O.I. group met quarterly and worked with the BLM on implementing all of the provisions of the bill. A new board of directors was created with 18 members, including many of the original O.I. group members. The Owyhee County Commissioners and the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes are ex-officio



There is a 700+ acre discrepancy between the agreed upon wilderness boundaries and BLM’s marking.

members of the board of directors.

Follow-up work that needed to be accomplished included setting up trailheads for wilderness areas, installation of wilderness kiosks, marking of wilderness boundaries, creating travel management plans for Owyhee County, evaluating boat-launch facilities for the wild and scenic rivers (many of them are very primitive), setting up a science program to evaluate and improve range management where needed, and building a science and conservation center with a staff person.

Some of those activities occurred fairly quickly after the bill passed and others are still in progress.

As shown on the map above, BLM marked the wilderness boundaries in the field, but the O.I. group noticed that some of the boundaries were not properly marked. A close analysis showed that 44 of the boundaries did not match what the group agreed to in the first place. Forty of those issues have been fixed, says John Robison, public lands director for the Idaho Conservation League.

A bill has been introduced to fix the remainder.

“Our original agreement has kept everyone on the same page,” he says. “You don’t need to have a wilderness trail sign to tell you are entering an amazing landscape with an incredible history,” Robison said. “But the wilderness markers let Idahoans know that they don’t ever have to worry about these canyons and old homesteads being buried by an open pit mine dump or being swapped out, sold off and posted with No Trespassing signs.”

One example where practical issues arose is along the East Fork Owyhee River on the edge of the Owyhee River Wilderness. There’s a gnarly jeep trail to the Garat launch site that provides access for river runners and outfitters. The group wanted there to be a turn-around by the river launch site for trucks with trailers, and a parking spot above for long-term parking.

But the BLM survey crews who put the first wilderness markers up hadn’t left enough room for the turn-around at the launch site and the O.I. group knew this might cause problems during the next float season. The O.I. group and the BLM came together and reviewed the original boundary maps. The BLM then adjusted the wilderness boundary to provide sufficient access while protecting the resource, as intended.



The author, hiking in Big Jacks Wilderness.



*Chris Black, tends his cattle in the Owyhees.*

“That shows the value of staying at the table and seeing a vision through,” Robison says.

In evaluating other river launch sites, the group decided that the BLM road to Crutcher’s Crossing needed to be repaired to keep this access route open to the public (waiting on funding), while the Hot Springs put-in for the Bruneau River is going to remain primitive for high-clearance 4WD vehicles because that’s part of the character of the place.

“Those roads are kind of self-limiting and self-protecting and people wanted to retain that in the future,” Robison notes. “Our original agreement has kept everyone on the same page,” he says.

About 200,000 acres of wilderness study areas were released for multiple-use management, and those areas can now

be managed for livestock grazing with fencing and water developments to ensure sustainable use, Lunte said.

A comprehensive travel management plan was written for the Owyhee Front area with designated trails and roads for non-motorized and motorized use, and that plan has been widely accepted by the various user groups, Richards said. The trails and roads are marked with numbers at key junctions, and any trails and roads not included in the plan were reclaimed and discontinued.

“The nice thing about that plan is that there are separate designated areas for motorized and non-motorized use,” Richards said. “That seems to be working out really well for those recreation groups.”

But the travel management plans for the BLM Bruneau and Jarbidge resource

areas are still being worked on, delayed by funding issues, she said.

Other gaps are setting up a science research and conservation center in Owyhee County, a project that may require some grant-writing and local fund-raising. The cost is expected to be in the \$200,000 range. It could be housed by an existing building or a new building, officials said. Owyhee County has also discussed the possibility of making some land available for a building, Richards said.

If federal dollars had been used for a science center, then it would have been “an agency-run thing vs. a community-run thing, and we want a community-run center,” Lunte said.

Overall, O.I. participants believe that the partnerships and friendships forged by a



Recreationist Wendy Wilson enjoys a leisurely float on the East Fork of the Owyhee River, one of the Wild and Scenic Rivers added in the legislation.



Leo Hennessy checks out the kiosk at the new Big Jacks Wilderness trailhead.

diversity of interests are transcending the natural resources work in Owyhee County to other locations and projects, including sage grouse conservation and sage grouse working groups, the new Idaho Rangeland Conservation Partnership, a collaborative group managing Rock Creek Ranch and more.

“The relationships we created through that collaborative environment we had in the O.I. is indeed transcending the group, and we’re seeing it come to fruition in other venues,” Lunte says.

“The group has created a lot more sympathy and understanding for each other,” Robison adds. “Conservationists don’t always consider long-term impacts to local economies and communities, and the local economic interests don’t always look at the long-term ecological impacts of past practices. The Owyhee Initiative allowed us to merge our concerns about the local economy, social health of the community and long-term ecological health of the land all together as one overarching goal.” □

Steve Stuebner writes about conservation success stories on a regular basis for *Conservation the Idaho Way*.



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