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Summary

Property owners and recreationists are in conflict over access rights on several Oregon rivers. The for-profit company Wilderness Unlimited shows how they could work together in mutually beneficial, voluntary arrangements that enhance wildlife and natural habitat.

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Wilderness Unlimited

By Joey Coon and Angela Eckhardt

In 1996 the Sandy River Chapter of the Association of Northwest Steelheaders (ANS) asked the Division of State Lands to conduct a navigability study of the Sandy River. They hoped the river would be declared navigable in order to claim state control of privately owned riverbank property for recreational use.

The Sandy River was deemed navigable in 2002 after an expensive, time-consuming process that pitted recreationists against landowners in a bitter struggle. Similar studies are underway or planned for the John Day, North Santiam, South Umpqua, Rogue, Trask, Kilshis, and South Santiam Rivers.

The problem with this approach is that it turns recreational assets into liabilities for affected landowners. Cascade Policy Institute environmental analyst John Charles lives on the Sandy River. He explains, “I still have to pay taxes for the land, but now I’ve lost my privacy and the ability to control access. This takes away all my incentives to voluntarily enhance the habitat and cooperate with recreationists.”

Wilderness Unlimited, a for-profit land management organization operating in Oregon and California, provides an alternative to this adversarial process. Wilderness Unlimited (WU) was founded in 1987 by a group of avid sportsmen who, like ANS, wanted better access to prime recreation areas on private lands. The founders of WU believed that public lands suffered from dangerously crowded hunting conditions, overpopulated campgrounds, and poor quality and abundance of wildlife and habitat. Thus they “turned to private landowners for refuge.” It is a testament of their success that private landowners in turn now seek a relationship with Wilderness Unlimited.

WU currently works with twenty-five landowners on 150,000 acres of land in Oregon. Landowners are paid to make their property available for recreational use. Property owners decide what activities are allowed on the land. They have the assurance that Wilderness Unlimited will limit the number of recreationists on their land, and that those recreationists will behave responsibly thanks to WU’s application process and oversight.

Outdoor enthusiasts pay an initiation fee and a yearly membership charge to gain access to land managed by WU. Members have access to a range of proper-

ties to suit their recreational needs, whether it be a slow moving river for fly fishing, the high desert for upland game birds, or open expanses for a relaxing camping vacation.

Oregon's rural landowners have found WU appealing because it provides a source of income while allowing them to maintain their land in pristine condition. The state's strict land use regulations limit landowners' ability to generate revenue from the use of their land, and farming and ranching are not viable options for some individuals whose land has been restrictively zoned. By working with WU, landowners are compensated for preserving open space, and are able to maintain control of their property.

Wilderness Unlimited is a boon to the environment as well. WU has an incentive to closely monitor the land, limiting recreational use when necessary. Landowners who work with Wilderness Unlimited have a financial reason to cultivate wildlife habitat and sustain local animal populations. WU gives them the financial means and educational resources to be good stewards of their land.

Wilderness Unlimited works because it relies on cooperation and incentives to meet the needs of recreationists, landowners and wildlife. Like any for-profit businesses, WU has good reason to understand and provide for the interests of its customers, both outdoor enthusiasts and property owners. As the largest organization of its kind in the Western United States, Wilderness Unlimited demonstrates a highly successful, harmonious solution to rural land disputes.

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