

Backcountry conservation

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The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is collaborating with other sporting groups and sporting goods manufacturers to support a new backcountry conservation designation for some Bureau of Land Management properties.

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Growing up in central Montana, Ryan Callaghan planned many of his hunting trips to public land. That tradition has followed him to Idaho where he now works as a marketing manager for a hunting apparel manufacturer whose staff is dedicated to public-land hunting.

“Everything we do recreation-wise is on public ground,” he said. “We have a narrow marketing campaign focused on mountain hunting.”

Hunting on the vast, iconic landscape of the West is something many sportsmen and women east of here dream about. Now hunters, conservation groups and outdoor gear manufacturers are looking to capitalize on that interest by making a push for a bigger role in the Bureau of Land Management’s new planning process, dubbed Planning 2.0 by the agency.

“The BLM does not have a lot of tools for how to manage places through their land management process,” said Joel Webster, director of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership’s Center for Western Lands.

But the group thinks the new planning process BLM is undertaking gives TRCP the opportunity to introduce a new concept that it’s calling backcountry conservation.

The designation would preserve access to BLM land, maintain existing uses, include weed management and restoration of habitat but block any new development such as road building.

The BLM lands the group has identified in northern Montana, about 231,000 acres close to the Missouri River Breaks and in the Judith Mountains, have been identified by the agency as unsuitable for oil and gas development, according to Hal Herring, an Augusta outdoor writer who has been working with TRCP on the project.

“What we’re trying to give birth to is the idea: wildlife habitat is a use of public land,” Herring said.

Although they’ve talked to some ranchers and county commissioners, the groups have not yet approached the Montana BLM with the idea. But they have proposed similar designations for BLM lands in Colorado, Idaho, Nevada and Oregon.

“Really what we want to see here is a tool that sees backcountry lands as a valuable use,” Webster said.

To that end, the groups are advertising the \$646 billion the outdoor recreation-based industry pumps into the economy each year, and have received support for their efforts from more than 200 sportsmen-dependent businesses, including some biggies like Orvis as well as smaller company’s like Callaghan’s First Lite. Eighteen Montana businesses, mostly fly shops, have signed a letter in support of the effort, along with five Wyoming businesses.

“This is absolutely fantastic,” said Ken Mayer, former director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife, who is supporting TRCP’s push. “The sportsmen need to hear this loud and clear. The Forest Service and BLM already hear from special interests. Sportsmen get short shrift. We are truly the sleeping giant that may awaken.”

Webster said he envision the designation as incorporating a “stronger commitment to baseline data collection and monitoring” of the landscapes. He said the group would also like to see the BLM committed to state fish and wildlife agency management objectives so development does not occur in a way that has a negative effect on wildlife resources — including the conservation of wildlife migration corridors.

“We don’t think everyone is going to hold hands and sing ‘Kumbaya,’ but we think we can bring the vast majority of stakeholders together,” Webster said.