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The National Wilderness Preservation System in Oregon: Making It Bigger and Better

by Andy Kerr¹

Abstract

Compared to its four adjacent neighbors, Oregon has the smallest percentage of its lands designated as units of the National Wilderness Preservation System. While the average of the areas of the five states protected as wilderness is more ~9 percent, in Oregon ~4 percent of the land is so protected. Oregon has 49 wilderness areas totaling 2,507,239 acres. Additional potential wilderness areas (a.k.a. roadless areas) in Oregon total nearly 13.5 million acres, Congress should expeditiously expand the National Wilderness Preservation System in Oregon.

Introduction

Congress enacted the Wilderness Act, which established the National Wilderness Preservation System, in 1964:

In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.²

Those areas of the National Forest System that had already been designated administratively by the Forest Service as either “wilderness” or “wild” areas were immediately included in the system.³ Over the years, Congress has seen fit to expand many of those original areas and to include additional areas as designated wilderness.

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² Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577), 16 U.S.C. 1131(a).

³ *Ibid.*, 1131–1136.

This paper compares the percentage of Oregon designated as wilderness to its adjacent neighbors; summarizes Oregon wilderness areas by name, federal administrative unit, size, and other facts; and summarizes the amount of de facto wildlands in Oregon that could be added to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Wilderness is an anchor to windward. Knowing it is there, we can also know we are still a rich nation, tending to our resources as we should — not a people in despair searching every last nook and cranny of our land for a board of lumber, a barrel of oil, a blade of grass, or a tank of water.

— Senator Clinton Anderson (D-NM)
(principal sponsor of the first Wilderness Act)



Figure 1. As of January 2009, Shellrock Lake is now safely within the Roaring River Wilderness on the Mount Hood National Forest. George Wuerthner

Area of Oregon Wilderness Versus Wilderness in Adjacent States

It's rather embarrassing. California, sure. Washington, okay. But Nevada? Even *Idaho!*? Compared to its closest neighbors, Oregon has the smallest percentage of its lands designated as units of the National Wilderness Preservation System (see Table 1).

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness lies the preservation of the World.

— Henry David Thoreau

State	Total Land Area (Acres)	Wilderness (Acres)	Percentage of Land Area Designated as Wilderness	Total Oregon Wilderness Acres Needed to Achieve Percentage Parity with This State	Total Additional Oregon Wilderness Acres Needed to Reach Percentage Parity with This State
Oregon	62,962,176	2,507,239	3.98%		
Idaho	53,484,128	4,484,466	8.38%	5,279,169	2,771,930
California	104,765,440	15,344,208	14.65%	9,221,598	6,714,359
Washington	45,630,688	4,484,466	9.83%	6,187,760	3,680,521
Nevada	70,765,965	3,448,404	4.87%	3,068,128	560,889
5-State Average	337,608,397	30,268,783	8.97%	5,644,968	3,137,729

Sources: • Land Area: [Wikipedia](#) • Wilderness: [wilderness.net](#)

The last column in Table 1 shows how many additional acres of wilderness Congress would need to designate in order for Oregon to achieve percentage parity with each of its neighbors. Fortunately, we have the wildland acres to do it — if we have the political will. I know just where those acres are.⁴

Existing Oregon Wilderness Areas

Table 2 lists existing Oregon wilderness areas by name, federal administrative unit(s), ecoregion, size, and year of establishment. The Size in Acres column represents the most accurate acreages available. The Notes column contains additional information highlighting the history of an area and/or interesting anomalies, as well as approximate acreage figures reflecting estimates at the time of designation as reference in the applicable statute. Congress enacted legislation pertaining to Oregon wilderness areas between 1964 and 2019:

- 1964 — Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577), Sept. 3, 1964
- 1968 — Mount Jefferson Wilderness, Oregon (Act) (P.L. 90-548), Oct. 2, 1968
- 1970 — Public Lands — Wilderness Areas (Act) (P.L. 91-504), Oct. 23, 1970
- 1972 — Minam River Canyon Wilderness, Oregon (Act) (P.L. 92-521), Oct. 21, 1972
- 1975 — Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Act (P.L. 94-199), Dec. 31, 1975
- 1978a — Endangered American Wilderness Area Act (P.L. 95-237) (incorporated Oregon Omnibus Wilderness Act of 1978), Feb. 28, 1978
- 1978b — Indian Peaks Wilderness Area, The Arapaho National Recreation Area and the Oregon Islands Wilderness Area Act (P.L. 95-450), Oct. 11, 1978
- 1984 — Oregon Wilderness Act (P.L. 98-328), June 26, 1984
- 1996 — Oregon Resource Conservation Act (P.L. 104-208), Sept. 30, 1996; Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act (P.L. 104-333), Nov. 12, 1996.⁵
- 2000 — Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act (P.L. 106-399), Oct. 30, 2000
- 2009 — Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-11), March 30, 2009.
- 2019 — John D. Dingell Conservation, Management and Recreation Act (Oregon Wildlands Act is a title) of 2019. March 12, 2019 (P.L. 116-09)

⁴ See “Additional Resources” at the end for the two books I’ve written on potential wilderness areas in Oregon.

⁵ Both 1996 laws contain identical language protecting Opal Creek Wilderness. In a rare occurrence, conservationists’ primary and backup legislative strategies both succeeded in Congress (involving attaching the Opal Creek language to two different bills), resulting in the area being “saved” twice.

Table 2. Oregon Wilderness Areas

Name	National Forest, BLM District, and/ or National Wildlife Refuge System	Level III Ecoregion	Size in Acres (original legislation and revised acreage)*	Year Established, Expanded	Notes
Badger Creek	Mount Hood National Forest	East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	29,090 29,815	1984, 2009	Originally designated with approximately 25,000 acres. In 2009, 1,135 acres were added to the core unit and a 3,004-acre Bonnie Butte Unit was added.
Black Canyon	Ochoco National Forest	Blue Mountains	13,400 13,088	1984	
Boulder Creek	Umpqua National Forest	Cascades	19,100 19,918	1984	
Bridge Creek	Ochoco National Forest	Blue Mountains	5,400 5,337	1984	
Bull-of-the-Woods	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	34,900 36,878	1984, 2009	Originally designated with approximately 33,900 acres. In 1996, 7,466 acres on the Willamette National Forest was transferred into the Opal Creek Wilderness upon its establishment. See note for Opal Creek. Approximately 10,180 acres was added in 2009.
Clackamas	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	9,470 9,474	2009	Includes five units: Big Bottom (1,263 acres), Clackamas Canyon (1,247 acres), Memaloose Lake (1,131 acres), Sisi Butte (3,243 acres), and South Fork Clackamas (2,579 acres)
Copper Salmon	Rogue River–Siskiyou National Forest	Coast Range	13,700 13,724	2009	
Cummins Creek	Siuslaw National Forest	Coast Range	9,173 9,026	1984	
Devil’s Staircase	Siuslaw National Forest and NW OR BLM	Coast Range	30,621 31,000	2019	
Diamond Peak	Deschutes, Willamette National Forests	East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	54,185 52,477	1964, 1984	Administratively established as a wild area on February 5, 1957, at approximately 35,440, with 15,700 acres added later.
Drift Creek	Siuslaw National Forest	Coast Range	5,798 5,792	1984	
Eagle Cap	Wallowa-Whitman National Forest	Blue Mountains	349,987	1964, 1972, 1984	Administratively established as a primitive area in 1930; administratively designated as wilderness on October 7, 1940, at approximately 216,250 acres. Later, 72,420 and 66,500 acres, respectively, were added.

			355,548		The 1972 addition, while a net gain, also resulted in 7,220 acres previously designated as wilderness being undesignated. The 1984 addition recovered 2,700 acres of the 7,220, thereby allowing Senator Hatfield to claim political credit for saving acres he had previously unsaved. The remaining 4,520 acres originally in the Eagle Cap Wilderness remain eligible for redesignation.
Gearhart Mountain	Fremont-Winema National Forest	East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	22,809 22,587	1964, 1984	Administratively established as a wild area on November 11, 1943, with approximately 18,709 acres. Later, 4,100 acres added.
Grassy Knob	Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest	Coast Range	17,200 17,176	1984	
Hells Canyon	Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, Vale District of the BLM (Hells Canyon National Recreation Area)	Blue Mountains	131,133 131,337	1975, 1984	Consists of 130,095 acres on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and 1,038 acres on the Vale District of the BLM. Includes three units: West Face (109,149 acres), McGraw Creek (22,930 acres), and Seven Devils, in Idaho. Also includes 83,811 acres in Idaho on the Nez Perce and Payette National Forests, for a total of 214,944 acres. In 1978, to facilitate construction of the Hells Canyon Rim Road, Congress—at the behest of Rep. Al Ullman and with the acquiescence of Senators Bob Packwood and Mark Hatfield—shrank the wilderness between P O Saddle and Lookout Mountain. The original 1975 wilderness boundary was congruous with the Hells Canyon Scenic Area (an administrative classification replaced by the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Act of 1975), a line ¼ mile west of the hydrologic divide between the Imnaha River and Snake River drainages. Approximately 1,120 acres were lost from the wilderness when the boundary was moved. P.L. 95-625 (Nov. 10, 1978), 16 U.S.C., § 460 gg nt.
Kalmiopsis	Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest	Klamath Mountains	179,655 180,102	1964, 1978a	Administratively established as a wild area on September 10, 1946, at approximately 78,850 acres. Increased by 92,000 acres in 1978. Later in 1978, using a legislative rider to avoid public notice or hearing, Senator Hatfield moved the wilderness boundary from the northern side of Bald Mountain, where it had protected a trail, to the southern side to allow construction of the Bald Mountain Road to allow de facto wilderness to the north to be logged. Approximately 102 acres were lost from the wilderness. P.L. 95-586 (Nov. 3, 1978), 16 U.S.C., § 1132nt.
Lower White River	Mount Hood National Forest	East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	2,870 2,871	2009	
Mark O. Hatfield	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	64,960	1984	Originally, and more properly, named the Columbia Wilderness (39,000 acres). Renamed in 1996. At least Hatfield is no

			65,436		longer in office. The main unit was expanded by 13,841 acres and a new Larch Mountain Unit of 12,106 acres was added in 2009.
Menagerie	Willamette National Forest	Cascades	4,800 4,952	1984	
Middle Santiam	Willamette National Forest	Cascades	7,500 8,758	1984	
Mill Creek	Ochoco National Forest	Blue Mountains	17,400 17,173	1984	
Monument Rock	Malheur National Forest	Blue Mountains	19,650 20,210	1984	
Mount Hood	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	63,538 64,742	1964, 1978a, 2009	Administratively established as a wild area on June 27, 1940, at approximately 14,160 acres. Approximately 33,000 acres added in 1978. In 2009, Congress added 7,527 acres to the (now) core unit and added three detached units: Barlow Butte (1,972 acres), Twin Lakes (6,396 acres), and White River (483 acres). Upon completion of a land exchange, 1,710 acres in the Tilly Jane area will be added to the wilderness.
Mount Jefferson	Deschutes, Mount Hood, Willamette National Forests	Cascades	107,008 109,082	1968, 1984	Administratively established as a primitive area in 1930 at approximately 100,208 acres. Later, 6,800 acres were added.
Mount Thielsen	Deschutes, Umpqua, Fremont-Winema National Forests	Cascades, East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	54,272 55,127	1984	
Mount Washington	Deschutes, Willamette National Forests	Cascades, East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	52,738 54,410	1964, 1984	Administratively established as a wild area on Feb. 5, 1957, at approximately 46,655 acres. Later, 6,400 acres added.
Mountain Lakes	Fremont-Winema National Forest	East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	23,071 23,036	1964	Administratively established as a primitive area in 1930; administratively established as wilderness on July 19, 1940.
North Fork John Day	Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman National Forests	Blue Mountains	121,352 120,998	1984	Includes four units: Upper North Fork John Day River (13,934 acres), Greenhorn Mountains (13,958 acres), Middle North Fork John Day River (86,197 acres), and Tower Mountain (8,103 acres).
North Fork Umatilla	Umatilla National Forest	Blue Mountains	20,435 20,225	1984	
Opal Creek	Willamette National Forest	Cascades	20,724 20,777	1996	Contiguous with the Bull-of-the-Woods Wilderness. Separately designated for political benefit. The total acreage includes 7,466 acres previously in the Bull of the Woods Wilderness, allowing Senator Hatfield to receive political credit for "saving" the same acreage twice. See note for Bull-of-the-Woods.

Oregon Badlands	Prineville District BLM	Northern Basin and Range	29,301 29,182	2009	Upon completion of a land exchange, 279 acres will be added to the wilderness.
Oregon Islands	Oregon Islands NWR	Offshore	575 925	1970, 1978b, 1996	Though the name was plural, originally the Oregon Islands Wilderness had just one unit, Goat Island near the California border, totaling approximately 21 acres. Later, the approximately 70 largest offshore Oregon islands, totaling approximately 459 acres were added. Finally, approximately 95 acres of the remaining largest "islands" (number unknown) were added, along with "[a]ll other federally-owned named, unnamed, surveyed and unsurveyed rocks, reefs, islets and islands lying within three geographic miles off the coast of Oregon and above mean high tide, ... also within the Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge." There is a total of 1,854 units.
Red Buttes	Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest	Klamath Mountains	3,750 3,777	1984	Approximately 16,500 acres of wilderness adjoins the Red Buttes Wilderness on the Rogue River National Forest in California, increasing the total area protected to 20,250 acres.
Roaring River	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	36,550 36,548	2009	Congress also established a 904-acre "potential wilderness" that will be added when human impacts have been adequately erased by nature.
Rock Creek	Siuslaw National Forest	Coast Range	7,486 7,273	1984	
Rogue-Umpqua Divide	Rogue River-Umpqua National Forest	Cascades	33,200 35,749	1984	
Salmon-Huckleberry	Mount Hood National Forest	Cascades	61,080 62,114	1984	Originally established at 44,560 acres. Later, 16,260 acres were added, including the 2,192-acre Salmon River Meadows Unit and the 4,257-acre Mirror Lake Unit. Upon completion of a land exchange, 160 acres will be added to the wilderness.
Sky Lakes	Fremont-Winema National Forest	Cascades, East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	116,300 113,687	1984	
Soda Mountain	Medford District BLM (Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument)	Cascades, Klamath Mountains	24,100 24,707	2009	Includes two units: Pilot Rock (17,022 acres) and Jenny Creek (6,873 acres).
Spring Basin	Prineville District BLM	Columbia Plateau	6,382 6,404	2009	Upon completion of three land exchanges, 2,887 acres will be added to the wilderness.
Steens Mountain	Burns District BLM (Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area)	Northern Basin and Range	174,744 170,202	2000	Includes five units: Alvord Peak (15,370 acres), High Steens (89,170 acres), Home Creek (20,740 acres), Little Blitzen (12,680 acres), and Upper Fish Creek (31,980 acres). Livestock are expressly prohibited on 99,859 acres of the wilderness, making it the first explicitly livestock-free wilderness ever designated by Congress.

Strawberry Mountain	Malheur National Forest	Blue Mountains	68,700 <i>69,517</i>	1964, 1984	Administratively established as a wild area on Feb. 9, 1942, at approximately 33,004 acres. Later, 35,300 acres were added.
Table Rock	Salem District BLM	Cascades	5,500 <i>5784</i>	1984	
Three Arch Rocks	Three Arch Rocks NWR	Offshore	15 <i>15</i>	1970	
Three Sisters	Deschutes, Willamette National Forests	Cascades, East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	286,708 <i>283,824</i>	1964, 1978a, 1984	Administratively established as a primitive area in 1937; administratively established as wilderness on Feb. 6, 1957, at approximately 196,708, acres. Later, 45,400 and 38,100 acres, respectively, were added.
Waldo Lake	Willamette National Forest	Cascades	39,200 <i>36,868</i>	1984	Contiguous with the Three Sisters Wilderness. Separately designated for political benefit.
Wenaha-Tucannon	Umatilla National Forest	Blue Mountains	66,417 <i>65,266</i>	1978	Approximately 111,048 acres adjoins the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness on the Umatilla National Forest in Washington, increasing the total area protected to 177,465 acres.
Wild Rogue	Rogue River–Siskiyou National Forest, Medford District BLM	Klamath Mountains	35,818 <i>35,221</i>	1978	Approximately 25,658 acres on the Siskiyou National Forest and 10,160 acres on the Medford District of the BLM are protected.
Oregon (legislated) Wilderness Acreage			2,501,765	The "approximately" acreages in legislation.	
Oregon (actual) Wilderness Acreage			2,399,166	As reported by federal agencies to wilderness.net.	
Land Area of Oregon			62,962,176		
Percentage of Oregon as Wilderness			3.81%	Based on agency-reported acreage.	
Total number of Oregon Wilderness Areas			48	Several are multi-unit.	
* Additional primary sources include accompanying legislative history including committee reports, and Wilderness.net (http://www.wilderness.net). Legislative acreage in Roman type, while official acreage (measured later by agency) in italic type.					

The Total Oregon Wilderness Resource: Protected and Unprotected, Generally Forested and Generally Tree-Free

The Oregon wilderness resource (both designated congressional wilderness and *de facto* (in fact) wilderness (wild in fact, but not [yet] in law) can be grouped as either:

- generally forested (which includes rock and ice above timberline) with most, but not all, in the National Forest System, administered by the Forest Service (also Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service); or
- generally tree-free Sagebrush Sea (aka sagebrush-steppe, aka Oregon High Desert), with most, but not all, being Bureau of Land Management holdings (also National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and State of Oregon).

Generally Forested

The operative word is generally. Besides the obviously forested, generally forested includes areas above timberline in the Cascade Range, East Cascade Slope and Foothills, Klamath Mountains, and Blue Mountains, as well as natural opening of wet and dry meadows, lakes, serpentine soils of the Klamath Mountains which are generally hostile to tree growth and more.

Table 3 depicts congressional protected wilderness areas, roadless areas the Forest Service has inventoried and for which a modicum of regulatory protection exists (but watch those loopholes!), larger (more than 5,000 acres) roadless areas, and smaller roadless areas (less than 4,999 acres, but more than 1,000 acres). All have wilderness values and contribute to Oregon's total wilderness resource.

Table 3. The Oregon Generally Forested Wilderness Resource		
<i>Oregon Forest Wilderness Resource</i>	<i>Acreage</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Wilderness Areas	2,530,000	35%
Forest Service Inventoried Roadless Areas	1,967,000	27%
Additional Oregon Wild-Identified Roadless Lands >5,000 Acres in Size or Smaller if Contiguous with a Wilderness Area	1,330,973	18%
Additional Oregon Wild-Identified Roadless Lands >1,000 to 4,999 Acres in Size	1,474,503	20%
Total Oregon Forest Wilderness Resource	7,302,476	100%
<i>Source: Erik Fernandez, Oregon Wild, 3/26/19</i>		

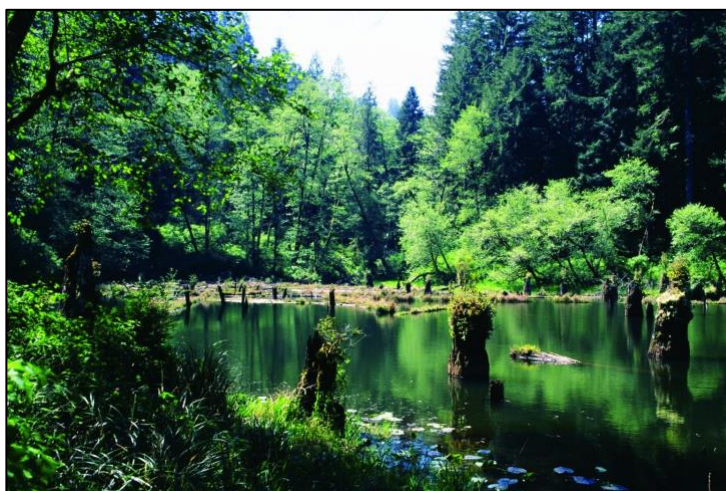


Figure 2. *Wilderness designation finally occurred for Wasson Lake in the Devils Staircase Wilderness, established in 2019.*
George Wuerthner

having wilderness characteristics but don't have an interim protection, addition wildlands that the Oregon Natural Desert Association has inventoried, roadless areas on national wildlife refuges, and roadless areas on lands administered by the State of Oregon. This most latter figure may increase as ONDA completes its inventory of the remaining state lands.

Generally Tree-Free

Again, the operative word is generally. Besides the obviously tree-free sagebrush-dominated landscape, generally tree-free includes vast stands of western juniper woodlands (more open than a forest, but more trees than a savannah), quaking aspen, mahogany patches, and relic (left-over from the Pleistocene) stands of ponderosa pine or white fir.

Table 4 depicts congressional protected wilderness areas, interim congressional somewhat-protected BLM wilderness study areas, lands that BLM has recently identified as

Oregon Desert Wilderness Resource	Acreage	Percentage
Wilderness Areas	205,867	2%
BLM Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs)	2,645,122	30%
Additional BLM-Identified Lands With Wilderness Characteristics (LWCs)	3,792,707	43%
Additional ONDA-identified Potential Wilderness Study Areas (pWSAs)	1,810,000	20%
Potential Wilderness on National Wildlife Refuges	365,653	4%
Roadless Natural Areas on State of Oregon Lands	62,244	1%
Total Oregon Desert Wilderness Resource	8,881,593	100%
<i>Source:</i> Craig Miller, Oregon Natural Desert Association, 15 March 2019		

Government protection should be thrown around every wild grove and forest on the mountains, as it is around every private orchard, and trees in public parks. To say nothing of their values as fountains of timber, they are worth infinitely more than all the gardens and parks of town.

— John Muir

Conclusion

Achieving designation as a wilderness area can literally take decades. However, once designated as wilderness by Congress, an area has the closest thing to permanent protection that exists. Much blood, toil, and sweat, and many tears have been expended to get the units in the National Wilderness Preservation System that Oregon has today. More such expenditures are ongoing and will always be. Congress should expeditiously expand the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Woe to them that join house to house; that lay field to field, till there is no room, that you may dwell alone in the midst of the earth.

— Isaiah 5:8

Acknowledgments

My thanks especially to Erik Fernandez of Oregon Wild and Craig Miller of Oregon Natural Desert Association, who are the keepers of their organizations’ respective wildlands inventories.

Additional Resources

- Wilderness.net (<http://www.wilderness.net>) was created in 1996 through a collaborative partnership between the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana College for Forestry and Conservation, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.
- Oregon Wild (<http://www.oregonwild.org>) is the premier forest wilderness organization in the state.
- Oregon Natural Desert Association (<http://onda.org>) is the premier desert wilderness organization in the state.
- Kerr, Andy. OREGON DESERT GUIDE: 70 HIKES. Seattle: The Mountaineers Books, 2000.
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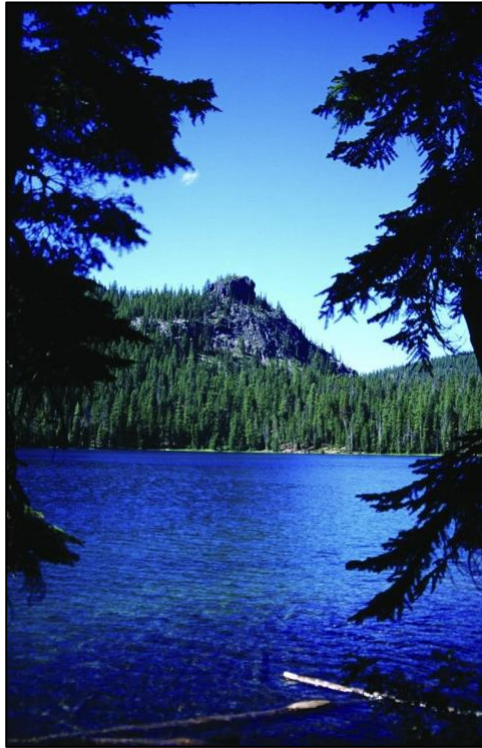


Figure 3. *Lower Rosary Lake, near the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail in the Maiden Peak Unit of the proposed Three Sisters Wilderness Additions, will someday be part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.* George Wuerthner

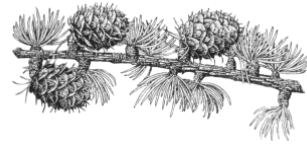
If we save all the roadless areas that are left as wilderness, in fifty years it won't be half enough.

— Senator Bob Packwood (R-OR)
(uttered first in 1975 on the edge of Hells Canyon
and repeated there again in 1986)

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Larch Occasional Papers



A deciduous conifer, the western larch has a contrary nature.

The Larch Company has occasionally issued papers on a variety of topics.

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17	2012	Oregon Private Timberland Owners Not Paying Enough State Timber Taxes
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14	2012	An Overview of Land Management Categories for Oregon Federal Public Lands Under the Northwest Forest Plan
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