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BY ZACH URNESS (*Salem Statesman Journal*)

MITCHELL, ORE.

Walking atop Sutton Mountain feels a bit like entering a pocket of African savanna perched high above the Oregon desert.

Waves of grassland spread across a wide plateau spotted with gnarled juniper trees. A gigantic sky — cobalt blue in one half and dark with incoming rain in the other — hangs over a landscape where antelope roam and pygmy rabbits bound.

"I came up here for the first time in second grade, and it has always been this wild, special place," said Chris Perry, a Wheeler County judge who grew up in nearby Mitchell. "It's one of those places with a natural isolation and feeling of wilderness, even though it's pretty accessible from the road."

Sutton Mountain is a long, 29,000-acre fault block that rises just above the Painted Hills, a popular tourist destination in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. In the past year, the two landmarks have become the center for one of the most interesting public lands proposals in Oregon.

A bill introduced by Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley last May would establish a 58,000-acre federal wilderness on Sutton Mountain and around the Painted Hills, creating what supporters call one large recreation-rich destination.

The idea is getting tourists who visit the Painted Hills — over 70,000 people in 2015 — to extend their stay by exploring a new wilderness on Sutton Mountain.

"The Painted Hills are a great introduction to this epic landscape — a small area where you can drive in, take a few short hikes, and be done in one afternoon," said Ben Gordon, stewardship director for the Bend-based Oregon Natural Desert Association. "Sutton Mountain would provide that larger, wilder experience."

The proposal isn't just about conservation.

The bill includes conveyance of 2,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management property to Wheeler County for economic development. That's a big reason the Wheeler County Board of Commissioners and Mitchell City Council endorsed the wilderness proposal — not something that often happens in rural communities.

"There's potential for this deal to breathe some new life into our community," Perry said. "Tourism has been growing more than ever before, and the land conveyance gives the community the tools to help itself."

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The Statesman Journal's original story can be found here:  
<http://stjr.nl/1PJ29cw>

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## ONTO SUTTON MOUNTAIN

To understand how the Painted Hills and Sutton Mountain combination would work for an out-of-town tourist, I headed over the Cascade Range and into Eastern Oregon last November. I got a room at the Oregon Hotel in Mitchell — an adorable little town in the heart of the canyon lands, even if it has seen more prosperous days.

The first day was spent hiking the Painted Hills, a remarkable place to be sure, but also so small it's easy to see everything within a few hours.

The next morning I headed out to explore Sutton Mountain with Perry and Gordon, the unique duo responsible for moving the wilderness proposal forward.

Perry, who everyone calls "The Judge," sports a mustache, beret and six-shooter holstered on the belt of his blue jeans. He's a staunch advocate for economic development in Wheeler County and was originally against the wilderness proposal.

Gordon, by contrast, is a Bend conservationist who loves trail-running, backcountry skiing and once backpacked the entire Pacific Crest Trail.

Despite their differences, a mutual trust developed between the two that allowed for something rarely seen — a legitimate compromise between rural and more urban interests.

We got into Gordon's truck and headed around to the mountain's east side, the beginning of our cross-country trek, and set out from Carrol Rim Trailhead.

We followed an old road uphill as the wide-open sweep of canyons and desert spread out below us. Sutton Mountain was classified as a wilderness study area in 1996 — another reason federal designation wouldn't be a huge leap — but it wasn't always so.

"I went to work for a rancher at an early age, back when this was still private land," Perry said. "One of my first jobs was moving sheep and later cattle up here."

After a few miles of uphill travel — and a little more than 1,000 feet of climb — we reached the mountain's plateau.

It was quite a sight.

A wide table of grassland spread across the top, with canyons channeling down the sides. The sky was so large it held three different weather patterns at once: bright blue sunshine, puffy white cumulus, and dark storm clouds that would eventually hit us with rain, wind and hail.

The most scenic part of the hike was along the long, sharp edge of the mountain, where cliffs drop thousands of feet onto the rolling landscape below.

As the storm arrived and we took cover to eat our sandwiches — washed down with water and a touch of whiskey — I started to learn a little more about how the judge of Wheeler County and an environmentalist from Bend became friends.

STEPPING IN HORSE (CRAP)

The idea of creating a wilderness area on Sutton Mountain has been around for over a decade, but any momentum had gone dormant when Gordon took the job about 3 ½ years ago.

He embedded himself in the community, visiting the area twice a week and taking part in community meetings once a month.

"When I started going out to visit people, it became plain that there was a little support for the wilderness, but there was a lot of misinformation out there and it needed more organization," Gordon said. "I just kept meeting people."

Perry puts it a differently.

"At first, I called him horse (crap)," Perry said. "Because everywhere I stepped, there he was."

Even so, Perry initially was against the idea of wilderness.

"There was nothing in it for the local public — the people who actually live next to the wilderness and aren't just visiting," he said. "Ben worked very closely with the citizens, allowing some concessions and looking for ways to make it a win for everybody. There's a genuine sense that he cares about the community."

The idea gained momentum thanks to a few breakthroughs.

Perry suggested including the conveyance of 2,000 acres of BLM land known as the Golden Triangle to Wheeler County, for development into an RV park or another function that could bring in revenue.

The moment also coincided with the beginning of the "Seven Wonders of Oregon" tourism campaign, which included the Painted Hills. The publicity brought a 61 percent increase in visitors to the Painted Hills and provided an economic boon to Mitchell.

"It has been amazing for the town — every business has seen an increase," said Skeeter Reed, owner of the Oregon Hotel in Mitchell. "The number of people staying at the hotel doubled this year, and they came from all over — Japan, China, Germany and the Philippines."

The goal of the wilderness proposal, Perry and Gordon said, is to build on that momentum.

"The timing was right," Perry said.

## CANYONS AND A WAITING GAME

The final leg of our cross-county hike brought us down off Sutton Mountain's plateau and into a narrow canyon.

We chatted with a handful of elk hunters and passed a few camps while following a trail through narrow cliffs rising overhead.

As we reached the car — bringing our day-long hike to an end — we talked about the one thing that worries Perry and Gordon most: congressional inaction.

Even with community support, passage of what's officially called the Sutton Mountain and Painted Hills Area Preservation and Economic Enhancement Act is far from certain.

A number of Oregon wilderness proposals are already languishing in Congress, and inaction could doom the goodwill built up by Gordon and the recent tourism to Wheeler County.

"If it takes a long time, a lot of the community buy-in is going to be lost," Perry said. "Our citizens want to do something — they want to take these tools and start doing something for the community.

"The time to do this is now."

## Explore Sutton Mountain

Sutton Mountain is surrounded by a collection of paved and gravel roads, with numerous access points into canyons and other features. The best time to visit is probably spring, when the mountain is filled with wildflowers.

Our trip began on the mountain's east side, off Highway 207 at Carrol Rim — an unimproved campsite and access point — where we followed an old road uphill toward the plateau and summit. The hike can last six

to 14 miles, depending on where you turn around, with about 1,300 feet of climb. Use a GPS device to avoid getting lost.

**Biking Sutton Mountain:** There's an excellent 34-mile loop around the base of Sutton Mountain on a collection of gravel and paved roads. To read about it, click here: <https://onda.org/pressroom/press-clips/discover-a-desert-gem-by-bike>

The bill

Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley's Sutton Mountain and Painted Hills Area Preservation and Economic Enhancement Act would designate four wilderness segments of a wilderness area on and around Sutton Mountain and the Painted Hills totaling 58,000 acres.

Read more here: <http://www.idahostatesman.com/news/state/idaho/article53547290.html#storylink=cpy>

### ***Sutton Mountain and Painted Hills Area Preservation and Economic Enhancement Act***

*Summary: S.1255 — 114th Congress (2015-2016)All Bill Information (Except Text)*

*Introduced in Senate (05/07/2015)*

*Sutton Mountain and Painted Hills Area Preservation and Economic Enhancement Act of 2015*

*Designates the Sutton Mountain Wilderness, Pat's Cabin Wilderness, Painted Hills Wilderness, and Dead Dog Wilderness in Oregon as wilderness areas and components of the National Wilderness Preservation System.*

*Permits grazing of livestock to continue if already established.*

*Declares that nothing in this Act alters, modifies, enlarges, diminishes, or abrogates the treaty rights of any Indian tribe.*

*Authorizes the Department of the Interior to: (1) conduct management activities necessary to maintain or restore fish and wildlife populations and habitats, and (2) take measures necessary for the control of fire, insects, and diseases.*

*Authorizes commercial services (including outfitting and guide activities) to the extent necessary for activities that fulfill recreational or other wilderness purposes of such areas.*

*Requires Interior to provide an owner of private property within the boundary of a wilderness area adequate access to such property.*

*Prescribe requirements for the Collins, Faulkner, Quant, and Twickenham Livestock LLC land exchanges in Oregon.*

*Directs Interior to convey specified lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management to Wheeler County, Oregon.*