

# CANYON

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Much like Jack Barry and the other Happy Hikers, Evans, who grew up in Ohio, was immediately awestruck by the deepest river-carved gorge in the United States.

"I'd never seen a great living river before," Evans said. "I loved Hells Canyon. It was magnificent country."



Evans

In 1967, while the Summer of Love was beginning and The Beatles were preparing to re-release their landmark album, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," the question in Hells Canyon was not so much whether a dam would be built — it was all but assumed that would happen, Evans said — but whether a private company or a public utility would own it.

Idaho Power Company had already built two dams upriver from the deepest section of Hells Canyon — Brownlee and Oxbow — and the company's third and final dam in that reach, Hells Canyon, produced its first megawatts that same year.

But the debate changed significantly on June 5, 1967, when the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the Udall v. Federal Power Commission case.

In the 6-2 decision, authored by Justice William O. Douglas — who had traveled extensively in the Wallowa Mountains, just west of Hells Canyon, and who wrote with great fondness about the region — the High Court mandated that the Federal Power Commission consider not just who should build a dam, but whether it was in the public interest to build a dam at all.

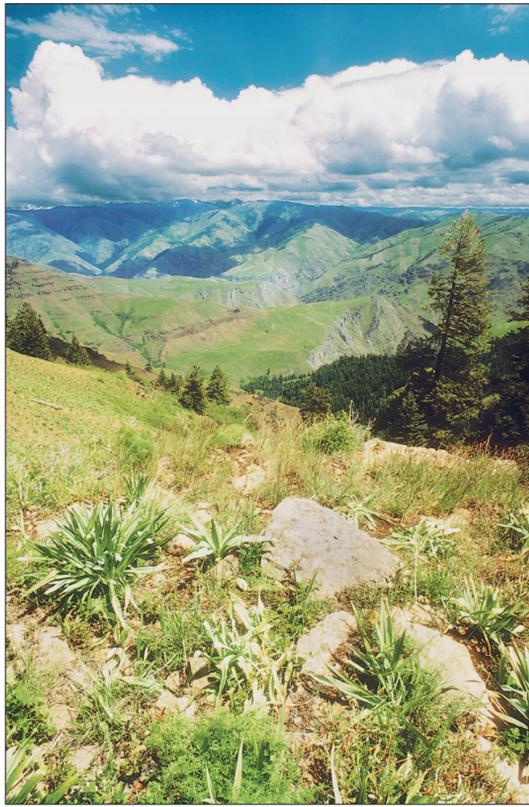
Evans said he convinced his bosses at the Sierra Club to file a motion to become an intervenor in the case — in effect, to gain legal standing to challenge the Federal Power Commission's authority to grant a license for the High Mountain Sheep dam.

But even as he worked on that legal avenue, Evans said, it became clear, to the newly formed Hells Canyon Preservation Council in particular, that the overriding goal ought not be limited to stopping one dam.

"We realized it was so much bigger of an issue," Evans said. "It's the whole thing we need to protect, not just one narrow corridor."

## Creating the Hells Canyon NRA

The Council soon found



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald file photo

Looking east across Hells Canyon into Idaho from the Rim Road in Oregon.

a congressional ally in Bob Packwood, the Oregon Republican elected as U.S. senator in 1968.

Evans vividly remembers accompanying Packwood on a raft trip down the Snake in May 1970. The river, swollen with snowmelt, was running at nearly a record level.

The group was camped at Granite Creek, near one of the river's rowdiest rapids, when Packwood posed a question to his guides, all of whom, like Evans, were devout opponents to a dam and equally zealous about protecting the Hells Canyon country from clearcut logging and road building.

"He asked us, 'what do you guys really want out of this?'" Evans remembers.

In that era, long before cellphones and Google Maps, somebody pulled a basic high-way map from a pack.

Evans grabbed a felt-tipped pen and drew the boundaries, generally speaking, of what would become the Hells Canyon NRA.

Two years later, in 1972, a judge granted a license to build a single high dam in Hells Canyon. But to Evans' great relief — and that of the Council members — the license wouldn't take effect until 1976.

"It was a reprieve," Evans said. "It gave us a chance to get a bill passed. We had to seize the opportunity."

By 1973 Evans had moved to Washington, D.C., to run the Sierra Club's office in the nation's capital. But he continued to work on the NRA bill, relying heavily on the local expertise of the Council and its president, Pete Henault.

"There's a tremendous amount of work that the organization did in publicizing Hells Canyon, to raise awareness of what a treasure and resource Hells Canyon is," said Brian Kelly, the Council's current restoration director.

The lobbying effort was not immediately successful, but Congress eventually passed the bill, and on the final day of 1975 — the day before the dam license would have taken effect — President Gerald Ford signed the bill into law.

Lois and Jack Barry were by then well established in La Grande, where they raised their family.

And although the couple no longer played active roles in the Council they had helped to establish, they remained — indeed Lois still remains — committed to its mission.

"We always kept in touch," Lois said.

The 1975 NRA Act prohibited not only the High Mountain Sheep dam but also a second proposed dam on the Snake to the north, near Asootin, Washington. The Act set aside 652,000 acres of public land in Oregon and Idaho to be managed separately from the surrounding national forests — including almost 200,000 acres of wilderness (the Hells Canyon Wilderness) was expanded to its current 217,000 acres in 1984).

The Hells Canyon Preservation Council's first major task was finished.

But in some ways its work was just beginning.

## Managing the NRA and other public lands

After 1975 the organization's focus shifted to making sure the U.S. Forest Service, which was given jurisdiction over the Hells Canyon NRA, wrote a management plan that reflected the principles behind the 1975 Act, Parry-



Photo by Larry Williams

Pete Seeger (with arm raised), a folk musician and social activist, rafts through Hells Canyon in 1972 with Boyd Norton, an original member of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council.

"There's a tremendous amount of work that the organization did in publicizing Hells Canyon, to raise awareness of what a treasure and resource Hells Canyon is."



— Brian Kelly, restoration director, Hells Canyon Preservation Council

Brown said.

But by then the Council's interests had also expanded to public lands that are in some cases close to 100 miles from Hells Canyon itself. Most of this is national forest land, but it includes swathes of ground overseen by the Bureau of Land Management.

The Council's wider view acknowledged both the complexity of the ecosystems and, more directly, the vital role that the greater Hells Canyon region plays as link between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin, said Kirsten Johnson, the Council's current development director.

Designations such as the Hells Canyon NRA, Johnson said, are merely "lines drawn on a map for us humans."



Johnson

But wild animals and sources of clean water and rare plants don't acknowledge such boundaries, she said.

"What happens outside the NRA also affects the NRA itself," Johnson said. "As the only conservation group in the area, obviously our mission grew."

But the Council itself didn't — at least not in the several years after the NRA Act became law.

Ric Bailey, who served as the Council's executive director from 1990 until he retired in 2005 — a period that included the organization's 1997 move from Joseph to La Grande — said that when he moved to Wallowa County in 1979 the Council was not particularly active, or visible.

Bailey, who initially worked for the Forest Service on a firefighting crew in Wallowa County, said he became familiar with, and entranced by, Hells Canyon.

"There's just something about Hells Canyon and the Wallows that spoke to me,"

said Bailey, who lives in Winthrop, Washington.

But he also saw that extensive logging of old growth ponderosa pine forests was happening even inside the NRA, which was supposed to be managed much differently from the surrounding national forest.

"The logging that was going on then would be looked at today as absolutely illegal and outrageous," said Bailey, who has himself worked as a logger. "It was simply industrial forestry rather than ecological forestry."

Around 1981 he helped to form the Wallowa Resource Council, a group Bailey describes as a "Wallowa County chapter of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council."

The groups in effect became one, Bailey said, largely because members were lobbying Packwood in the early 1980s to pass a bill that would expand the Hells Canyon Wilderness as well as create several new wilderness areas elsewhere in Oregon.

"Packwood was most familiar with HCPC, and we needed to let him know it was still active," Bailey said.

The Oregon Wilderness Bill did become law in 1984.

Bailey, meanwhile, worked as a volunteer with the Council throughout the 1980s, a decade when its mission increasingly involved trying to curtail the widespread logging of big pines and to express its concerns about declining runs of salmon and steelhead in the Snake River and its tributaries.

And the Council's work — especially related to logging — involved not only the Hells Canyon NRA but the adjacent parts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and its neighbor to the west and north, the Umatilla National Forest.

The region's timber in-

dustry was booming during much of the 1970s and 1980s, a trend driven largely by logging on national forests.

The Wallowa-Whitman, for instance, between 1976 and 1989 offered for sale an annual average of 203 million board-feet of timber, much of which was valuable ponderosa pine.

Since 1993, by contrast, the Wallowa-Whitman has never offered more than 79 million board-feet in a single year, and in more than half those years it offered less than 50 million.

Several factors contributed to this dramatic trend.

Much of the old growth pines had already been cut, for one thing.

Bailey said local conservationists, among them Loren Hughes of La Grande, had been urging Forest Service officials to reconsider the volume of logging they were allowing many years before the Council was even formed.

But Kelly said the federal government's decision in the early 1990s to list several salmon and steelhead runs as threatened or endangered also played a significant role in curtailing logging on public lands in the Hells Canyon region.

"That was certainly a wake-up call — that some of these runs might go extinct," he said.

Federal protection for anadromous fish affected land management in the Hells Canyon region in much the same way that the listing of the spotted owl did for public forests west of the Cascade Mountains, although not as dramatically.

One of those effects was the Forest Service's decision, in 1993, to stop cutting live trees larger than 21 inches in diameter in Eastern Oregon.

That policy, one of several protections known collectively as the "eastside screens," constituted a major victory in the Council's campaign to curtail logging of old growth trees in the Hells Canyon region, Parry-Brown said.

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