

News Article, Forest Reserve Created at Last

By *The Oregonian*

This article was published in the *Oregonian* on March 18, 1906. It discusses the establishment of the Blue Mountain Forest Reserve.

In 1901 residents of Baker County sent a petition to their congressional representative requesting that the mountains around Baker City and Sumpter be withdrawn from the public domain in order to protect the area's water supply. The following year residents of Malheur and Harney counties submitted petitions asking that the Strawberry Mountains and the headwaters of the Malheur, Silvies, and South Fork of the John Day rivers be withdrawn to protect water, timber, and grazing resources. The Secretary of the Interior responded in July 1902 by authorizing the temporary withdrawal of more than 3 million acres of land in the forested areas of northeastern Oregon.

Federal surveyor Harold Langille later noted that the 1902 withdrawal was "doubtless the most controversial of all the withdrawals....It bore upon the economic life and welfare of almost the entire northeastern quarter of Oregon. Agriculture, stock-raising, mining, lumbering and all of their adjunctive interests were actually or potentially concerned." Langille recalled a meeting in Canyon City with area stockmen, many of whom were initially against the proposed reserve. He explained to them that the reserve was not intended to keep them off the land but rather to prevent destructive exploitation of forest resources and to reduce conflict over grazing and logging activities. He noted that "many of the strongest opponents of the proposed reserve afterward came to me and said that if the facts were as I had stated them they would welcome the reserve."

More problematic than local opposition were the land speculators who claimed land in the proposed reserve with the intention of trading it for more valuable land elsewhere in the state. This practice was at the heart of a major land fraud scandal that resulted in the indictment of dozens of Oregonians, including most of Oregon's congressional delegation.

This land fraud scandal delayed the establishment of the Blue Mountain Forest Reserve, but in March 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt finally authorized the permanent withdrawal of 2,627,270 acres of land in the Blue Mountains. The reserve was intended to conserve the area's water supply for farmers, as well as to reduce conflict between stockmen and to protect timberlands and summer rangelands from "destruction and wasteful use," as explained in the *Oregonian* article reproduced here.

In 1908, the Blue Mountain Forest Reserve was broken up into several different administrative units, which later evolved into the Wallowa-Whitman, Malheur, Ochoco, and Umatilla national forests.

Further Reading: Langston, Nancy. *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West*. Seattle, Wash., 1995.

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