

Transforming Controversy into Consensus: The Steens Mountain Initiative¹

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Abstract: Even bitterly disputed management issues can be tempered or eliminated. Agency outreach efforts in conjunction with the media, working groups, effected interests, field trips, and “open house” social events can result in unified management efforts. In addition, distortions or misconceptions can be clarified. Recurrent efforts are required to build good working relationships among varied interest groups.

The Steens Mountain rises to 1 vertical mile above the Alvord Desert and stretches horizontally for over 30 miles. This fault block mountain is located in sparsely populated southeastern Oregon. The Steens possess remarkable opportunities to view glacially carved canyons and gorges, abundant wildlife, and the Donner and Blitzen National Wild and Scenic River. Abundant, uncrowded open space, and outstanding natural features, have contributed to the heightened sense of public awareness and concern over the management of the Steens.

Controversy

To the uninformed public it appears that there are two bifurcated, intolerant camps. One camp consists of the historic users of much of the Steens, the cattle ranchers, and area residents who hunt, fish and often value the land as their own. The other camp is composed of preservation minded individuals and groups. The management agency, in this case, the USDI Bureau of Land Management, often appears to be in a third camp, attempting to be empathetic, and in some instances attempting to placate everyone.

In recent years almost all proposed management actions by the Bureau have been questioned, protested or appealed. Trust was almost nonexistent. If the Bureau published a brochure, some area residents felt it was “advertising.” Preservation groups would issue newsletters stating, “Human activities are threatening this fierce, yet fragile land and its inhabitants.” Yet in the same newsletter, members would be encouraged to “Visit the high desert. Take some friends. Take pictures. Write about what you have seen. Tell others about it.”

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Dialectic Outreach

Bureau personnel recognized that in many cases both camps were often desiring the same future for the Steens. A review of numerous letters, appeals and protests showed that no one wanted to impair the land. The goal, by all parties was to achieve sustainability. Sustainability for some meant maintaining their way of life on a ranch; for others it meant continued good fishing or a hike in the pristine backcountry.

Historically, public outreach was conducted in compliance with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations or in order to share a management initiative. Bureau personnel felt a new approach was needed. Not unlike a department store finding an excuse for a sale, the Bureau found excuses for having non-traditional meetings. The Bureau also recognized that studies had established that more than 80 percent of visitors to the Steens came from outside the region. Therefore, outreach efforts would include distant areas such as Portland, Oregon which is more than 200 miles from the Steens.

A Steens video was produced that detailed the Bureau’s management practices. A Visitor Use Study was conducted and the results shared with the media and numerous groups to discuss the findings and management implications. Open house events were held simply to bring people together and answer questions. These non-NEPA type meetings stopped the spread of distorted information. Working groups were formed from diverse interests to bring all groups to the table in the decision-making process. Follow-up meetings showed the Bureau’s commitment to public involvement and good communications. Guest speakers from outside the agency shared their opinions. Finally, field trips and individual tours were conducted.

Results

The results of this outreach effort are positive and ongoing. Early reactions from some interest groups were that the Bureau’s attempts were merely a public relations scheme. In subsequent meetings some of these same critics defended the Bureau to newcomers, thereby showing a desire to work together. In a few cases those who enjoyed vilifying the Bureau were annoyed that the Bureau would go beyond the required NEPA meetings, and questioned, “Why are you having these meetings anyway?” Critics often found that, realistically, issues were more complicated than they had assumed. Detractors were disarmed by meetings aimed at information sharing, or at working in a group that required exposure to divergent views.

Outreach efforts are not without cost; they are time consuming and labor intensive. Initially, some staff members were wary of any type of outreach based on past formal NEPA public involvement meetings. Finally, too many working groups can be counterproductive. It may be more beneficial to tackle one or two high priority concerns rather than the top four or five.

Conclusion

- Building trust, once it has been lost, is very difficult.
- Creative tools such as video's and studies, allow the agency to show it is willing to lead.

- Private opinion creates public opinion; agencies cannot simply hope that people will understand.
- Guest speakers such as county officials, researchers, and interest groups show that there are many beliefs and that the agency will listen.
- Autocratic management will fail (one must be able to modify plans, etc.)
- Being timid will also result in failure (one must be able to express why a management action is needed).
- Legitimacy is earned, not given (actions, in this case on the land, speak louder than words, or more rules and regulations).
- Reasonable opinions will most often prevail.