BACKCOUNTRY BORDERLANDS

Safeguarding Sportsmen’s Interests Across State Lines
**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona-New Mexico Border</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon-Washington Border</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado-Wyoming Border</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho-Nevada Border</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California-Oregon Border</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Front cover photo by Joel Webster.  
Elk hunter in the Great Burn Roadless Area near the Idaho-Montana divide.
Strong management rules for America’s inventoried roadless areas sustain some of our highest-quality big-game habitat and fisheries. They also safeguard the public-lands hunting and angling opportunities that form the bedrock of the nation’s sporting traditions.

A fringe benefit of consistent backcountry regulations is the security they provide to hunters and anglers in the border regions between states. Thousands of sportsmen hunt and fish in these borderland areas and rely on roadless rules to assure the future of fish and wildlife in their favorite hunting and angling destinations.

Many big-game herds migrate back and forth over mountain ranges and, consequently, the lines that separate bordering states. Changes in land management in one state could impact deer and elk behavior, reproduction and survival in another, affecting tag allocations and sportsman opportunity across jurisdictional lines.

Roadless headwater streams often flow into high-quality trout fisheries in neighboring states and are important for thermal refuge, insect production and spawning habitat. Development around headwater streams could impair water quality, diminishing downstream fish populations and mainstem angling opportunities.

Fortunately, the federal 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule provides certainty to sportsmen across state boundaries. Under this rule, outdoorsmen who hunt and fish national forest backcountry borderlands – like the Warner Mountains along the California-Oregon border – have added assurance that management activities in the neighboring state minimize impacts to roadless areas and shared deer and elk herds.

Maintaining strong national roadless regulations will uphold America’s shared fish and wildlife populations, prime habitat and the interests of hunters and anglers – across state lines.
Much of the reason sportsmen continue to experience high-quality hunting and fishing on public lands is because of inventoried roadless areas, commonly called “backcountry,” located on America’s national forests and grasslands. Broadly defined, roadless areas contain 5,000 or more contiguous acres without improved roads. Found in 38 states and Puerto Rico, they comprise 58.5 million acres, or 2 percent, of the U.S. land base. Hunters and anglers know that these areas contain some of our best remaining fish and wildlife habitat.

Roadless lands provide large blocks of exceptional range for big-game animals such as mule deer, elk, moose, bear, bighorn sheep and mountain goats. While some roads are important for enabling sportsmen’s access, too many roads decrease secure habitat, thereby increasing species’ vulnerability to overharvest. Fewer mature animals, shorter seasons and fewer available tags can result.

America’s backcountry also sustains intact waterways where trout and salmon – dependent on clean water, stable stream flows and consistent lake levels – can thrive. These waters are strongholds for some of our last native fish populations, providing unrivaled opportunities for anglers. Too many roads located in sensitive areas can increase sediment loads in waterways and lower the quality of spawning habitat, often decreasing the number and size of wild trout.

In today’s urbanized society, roadless areas offer unique “primitive” and “semi-primitive” recreation opportunities where sportsmen can escape noise and commotion and find solitude and challenge. These areas are important not only to sportsmen who hunt and fish in the backcountry: Roadless lands also serve as “source areas” that produce fish and game, enabling everyone – even those who remain on nearby roaded areas – to enjoy equal-opportunity access to top-quality hunting and fishing.

Our nation’s fish and wildlife populations are a shared outdoor legacy made possible by the foresighted actions of earlier generations. This heritage has special meaning – and not just for residents of Western states, where many of these animals reside. Citizens across the country can nurture dreams of someday visiting distant landscapes and experiencing the wonder of walking in big-game territory or alongside wild trout fisheries. Roadless areas help make these uniquely American dreams a reality.

Elk, mule deer, trout and salmon, however, move without regard to state boundaries, and sportsmen who hunt and fish in one state share fish and wildlife populations with their neighbors in adjacent states. Roadless areas located near or bordering other states provide important habitat that benefits wildlife and sportsmen across a multi-state region. Consistent management of these backcountry lands ensures that their game populations will continue to thrive – across state lines.

Established in 2001, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule is designed to limit backcountry commercial timber harvest and road construction and reconstruction – activities with the greatest likelihood of fragmenting and altering landscapes – with a goal of safeguarding the special values found on roadless national forests across America. The rule utilizes a multiple-use approach to backcountry conservation, allowing reasonable management activities, such as timber cutting to protect communities from wildfire and improve forest health, and permitting projects from valid existing rights to proceed.

The federal rule was adopted following more than 600 public meetings and 1.7 million citizen comments, with more than 95 percent of respondents advocating roadless area conservation. A poll by the
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance in 2000 found that 83 percent of hunters and 86 percent of anglers supported the conservation of roadless national forests.

Despite the popularity of the 2001 roadless rule among sportsmen, pro-development interests have filed several lawsuits against it and created some uncertainty about the rule’s long-term future. Legislation that is friendly to industrial development and that would undermine the rule has been introduced in Congress. Sportsmen remain committed to ensuring that a strong and popular backcountry conservation rule perseveres.

Two states, Idaho and Colorado, elected to develop state-based roadless rules under a process initiated by the Bush administration. This process allowed individual states to petition the federal government and initiate federal rulemaking processes to create state-specific roadless rules.

American sportsmen have demonstrated willingness to support state-based roadless rules as long as they include backcountry conservation measures that are, on balance, as strong as or stronger than the protections afforded by the 2001 roadless rule. But attaining this outcome is difficult due to the absence of clear and specific national, cross-jurisdictional conservation standards for state-based rules combined with local development interests inordinately influencing the process. The creation of additional state-based rules could result in a disjointed mixture of incompatible management plans. Weak regulations in one state could result in fewer opportunities for sportsmen who hunt and fish in neighboring states.

A significant threat to responsible backcountry management comes from efforts by commercial development interests to eliminate the 2001 and state-based roadless rules. Lawsuits and proposed legislation attempt to overturn national forest roadless rules so the management of roadless areas can only be determined at the local planning level, where commercial developers often have the highest level of influence. If they are successful, a patchwork of permissive management prescriptions will result. This scenario not only would affect our ability to hunt and fish; it also could decrease the $190 billion in economic activity generated annually in America through hunting-and fishing-related pursuits.

Alternatively, if the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture successfully sustains the national standards implemented by the 2001 rule, sportsmen can be assured that their favorite backcountry public-lands hunting and fishing destinations will be conserved for generations to come. Upholding the benchmark created by the national roadless rule will safeguard America’s outdoor heritage across the country.

**Backcountry Borderlands Case Studies**

The need for consistent roadless area management can be illustrated by backcountry borderland areas that encompass key fish and wildlife habitat in the American West. This report investigates five case studies in which consistent standards for roadless area conservation serve sportsmen by safeguarding backcountry lands and prime hunting and fishing – across state lines.

- Arizona-New Mexico: Backcountry deer and elk of the Blue Range
- Oregon-Washington: Fisheries of the Walla Walla River Watershed
- Colorado-Wyoming: Elk herds of the Elkhorn and Solomon Creek roadless areas
- Idaho-Nevada: Native trout of the Bruneau River
- California-Oregon: Mule deer of the Warner Mountains

Photo by dusansmetana.com
In the Apache and Gila national forests, a large complex of inventoried roadless areas sprawls across the Arizona-New Mexico state line. These lands, prime habitat for the region’s fish and wildlife populations, benefit sportsmen, who pursue the area’s deer, elk and trout.

This cluster of backcountry lands consists of the Campbell Blue (7,033 acres), Centerfire (13,130 acres) and Nolan (6,780 acres) roadless areas southeast of Alpine, Ariz., and the Mother Hubbard (5,895 acres) and Nolan (13,050 acres) roadless areas to the west of Reserve, N.M. They total approximately 48,000 acres.

Elevations range from approximately 6,400 feet up to 8,960 feet at the crest of Aspen Mountain. Vegetation includes high-elevation desert grasslands, pinyon-juniper savannas and woodlands, mixed conifer woodlands, ponderosa pine and ponderosa pine-Douglas fir forests.

These lands provide important habitat for a number of game animals in both New Mexico and Arizona, including elk, mule deer, mountain lions, black bears, Merriam’s turkeys and pockets of Coues white-tailed deer. Elk are especially abundant, and the New Mexico portions of these populations are managed by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish for their trophy potential. Elk are becoming increasingly common in the Arizona portion as grasslands and riparian areas have been released from livestock grazing.

An aggressive prescribed burn program has been implemented to help restore and reinvigorate perennial grasses that are the primary forage species for the elk.

Backcountry lands in the Blue Range are particularly important to elk in their seasonal movements. The Arizona portions of these IRAs contain more high-elevation habitats than the New Mexico segments. In years with heavy snowfall, such as the winter of 2009-10, elk move across the state line into the lower elevation grasslands and savannas west of U.S. Highway 180 in New Mexico. These roadless areas also offer critical range where elk can seek refuge from the intense activity on adjacent roaded sections of the national forests during big-game seasons.

Because these big-game herds are shared between two states, a reduction in roadless acreage and habitat security in one state could affect hunters in the adjacent state. Increased motorized use could reduce escape and bedding cover and likely would expose the animals to increased hunting pressure, which in turn could force state agencies to reduce...
hunting opportunity. Increased motorized use on the winter range also could decrease deer and elk reproductive rates, again adding pressure to a valuable shared big-game resource.

These borderlands also encompass prized fisheries, with the roadless areas comprising the headwaters of the Blue River in Arizona and the San Francisco River in both New Mexico and Arizona. The San Francisco joins the Blue shortly before it reaches the Gila River at the Gila Box. Commercial activities that result in road building would reduce the infiltration of snowmelt and summer rains, accelerating runoff and depriving springs and seeps of their water sources.

Water sources in these arid landscapes are critical to wildlife. The increased runoff also would expedite erosion and the resultant sedimentation, affecting anglers seeking the rare Gila trout. Impacts from the gigantic Wallow Fire in the summer of 2011 were confined to small portions of the two northernmost IRAs. Most of the areas impacted were scorched by lower intensity back burns and black lining operations, and they should recover quickly.

Fortunately, consistent and meaningful federal regulations conserve the backcountry character of roadless areas in both New Mexico and Arizona, benefiting sportsmen who hunt and fish these lands on both sides of the border. Maintaining national policies for the conservation of roadless areas will help safeguard the high-value fish and wildlife habitat of the Blue Range for the benefit of sportsmen across state lines.
Just east of Milton-Freewater, Ore., and Walla Walla, Wash., are two roadless areas: the Mill Creek Watershed (24,566 acres) and Walla Walla River (34,414 acres), both managed by the Umatilla National Forest. These backcountry lands not only provide important habitat for high-quality big-game hunting, they also are the source of key headwater streams for the Walla Walla River, an important salmon and steelhead fishery for anglers in both Oregon and Washington.

The Umatilla National Forest is located within the greater Blue Mountain region of northeast Oregon and southeast Washington. Elevations within the two roadless areas range from 2,350 feet at the lowest river bottom to 6,250 feet at Table Rock, located at the uppermost headwaters of Mill Creek.

A major tributary of the mid-Columbia River, the Walla Walla River watershed encompasses 1,758 square miles of both forested mountain and lowland habitat that originates primarily in Umatilla County, Ore., and flows through Walla Walla and Columbia counties in Washington. The watershed is highly productive for both agriculture and wildlife and currently is one of the highest-priority areas in southeast Washington for restoration of wild salmonid populations. Both forks of the Walla Walla River meet in Oregon and flow north near the city of Walla Walla, where they join Mill Creek. All of the Walla Walla headwater streams are important trout and salmon fisheries, originating in roadless areas that provide recreational fishing to anglers on both sides of the Oregon-Washington border.

The Walla Walla watershed harbors intact, healthy populations of summer steelhead trout, resident redband trout, and bull trout. Coordinated state, federal and tribal efforts are under way to restore and expand their distribution in the watershed, especially in the Mill Creek drainage. Fish passage through the towns of Milton-Freewater and Walla Walla is currently a limiting factor for this fishery, due to flood control structures and low summer flows. Bi-state restoration efforts are being implemented to improve passage so the fish can migrate to the excellent up-river backcountry habitats for spawning. The Umatilla Tribe, working with state and federal partners, also is achieving success in restoring a sustainable fishery for spring chinook salmon in the Walla...
Walla River drainage; in fact, the 2010 return runs of chinook were the highest recorded in the last 75 years.

The greater Umatilla National Forest also supports a large herd of Rocky Mountain elk as well as healthy, huntable populations of bighorn sheep, white-tailed deer and mule deer, black bear and mountain lions. The Blue Mountain elk herd is highly mobile, ranging from 1,400 feet to more than 6,400 during summer migration. Oregon Big Game Unit 55, which is partially located within the Mill Creek and Walla Walla roadless areas, is one of the most sought-after elk hunting units in the state. Sportsmen apply for years for a chance to hunt there. On the Washington side, the Mill Creek Roadless Area provides high-quality hunting opportunities for deer and elk.

The upper Walla Walla watershed and its fish and wildlife, including the Blue Mountain elk herd and salmon and trout populations, are strong or improving in part because of the habitat protection offered by these Oregon and Washington roadless areas. Loss of roadless character in the upper Walla Walla would negatively affect fish and wildlife and sportsmen in both Oregon and Washington. Construction of new forest roads not only would fragment important elk habitat, road-related disturbance could compromise efforts by state, federal and tribal wildlife agencies to restore salmon and steelhead populations. The Northwest Power and Conservation Council, the federal agency charged with balancing hydropower production with fish and wildlife protection in the Columbia River system, has identified sedimentation and summer water temperatures as two of the major limiting factors to salmon restoration in the watershed. These factors could be made measurably worse by road construction in the upper Walla Walla River, currently the primary source of clean, cool water for the entire river system.

National standards for roadless conservation serve sportsmen in Washington and Oregon by maintaining the backcountry characteristics of the Walla Walla and the Mill Creek roadless areas, as well as the excellent hunting and fishing these areas provide.
National forest lands span the border of north-central Colorado and south-central Wyoming for 23 miles.

The Routt National Forest, on the Colorado side, is home to the 10,500-acre Elkhorn Roadless Area. On the Wyoming side, the Medicine Bow National Forest hosts the 5,760-acre Solomon Creek Roadless Area. These areas form a three-mile stretch of uninterrupted backcountry.

Bordering the Solomon Creek area to the north are the 9,920-acre Little Snake and 3,800-acre Huston Park Addition roadless areas. These areas connect with another 31,000 acres of protected backcountry. Taken together, the lands total 61,530 acres and result in a 15-mile corridor, interrupted only by two national forest roads that provide access to sportsmen.

Elevations in these roadless areas range from approximately 7,000 feet to nearly 10,000 feet at Elkhorn Peak. Spruce and fir dominate the higher elevations, with aspen stands more prevalent in the middle elevations.

Elk are abundant on both sides of the border, and the region is home to the second-largest elk herd in the United States, making it a sought-after area for hunters in both Wyoming and Colorado. This contiguous complex of backcountry provides elk production habitat, summer range and migration routes between the two states. The variations in elevation and habitat type sustain elk year-round.

Mule deer migrate from higher-elevation summer habitat through the Elkhorn Roadless Area and nearby to the lower-elevation habitats to the west. They also use this expanse of public lands throughout the summer, when graze is plentiful and other habitat requirements are met. Both the Elkhorn and Solomon Creek roadless areas provide crucial habitat for black bears, moose and mountain lions. These three species are pursued by hunters on both sides of the Colorado-Wyoming border.

In addition to big game, both the Solomon Creek and Elkhorn roadless areas provide crucial habitat for the native Colorado River cutthroat trout. The Little Snake River System flows through much of this complex of backcountry areas, where genetically pure, self-sustaining populations of these prized cutthroat benefit from the undeveloped landscape.

Sportsmen can enjoy a true backcountry hunting experience in the Solomon Creek Roadless...
Area in Wyoming, where most hunting and fishing access is on foot or horseback and the elk remain on public lands throughout the hunting season. While hunting is good in the Colorado portion of this roadless complex, motorized trail use in the Elkhorn area during big-game season often displaces elk to largely inaccessible private lands and to nonmotorized areas in Wyoming.

Road construction and increased motorized traffic in these backcountry areas could fragment habitat and increase big-game vulnerability. As a result, more elk could move onto private lands during the big-game season, diminishing public-lands hunting opportunities in Colorado and Wyoming.

The diversity of important game species and their relatively large home ranges within this Colorado-Wyoming borderland area reinforces the need for large, continuous stretches of habitat, which will maintain healthy and viable game populations capable of withstanding significant hunting pressure. Management rules that assure the long-term conservation of the Elkhorn and Solomon Creek roadless areas benefit borderline sportsmen and help state fish and wildlife agencies maximize high-quality hunting opportunities in both Colorado and Wyoming.
Out of the high country of the Mahoganies Range and the Copper Mountains of northeastern Nevada flow the headwaters of the Bruneau River, which offers unique opportunities to fish for native redband trout in both Nevada and Idaho.

The Bruneau is sourced primarily from public-lands headwaters and numerous backcountry waterways. Streams originating in roadless areas such as Copper Creek, Cottonwood Creek, McDonald Creek, Telephone Creek and Coon Creek help maintain cool water temperatures and stable streamflows during hot summer months while providing the Bruneau's trout populations valuable spawning habitat in the spring.

In fact, the Bruneau is fed by nine distinct roadless areas totaling 107,000 acres in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest: Copper Mountains, Rattlesnake, Pine Mountain, Hot Springs Butte, Robinson, Hicks Mountain, Vincenti, Jarbidge-West Fork and Jarbidge-Person Creek. Additional water is sourced from neighboring BLM-administered public lands and the Jarbidge Wilderness to the east.

The Bruneau River is one of a few Nevada rivers that are part of the Columbia River Basin. Salmon and steelhead once found their way to these waters and today's Bruneau River fisheries include genetically pure Columbia Basin redband trout and mountain whitefish in addition to native nongame fish species. Redband trout are native only to the Columbia Basin and are indigenous to extreme northern Nevada. Public interest in catching native trout species continues to grow, and Nevada watersheds present unique opportunities to pursue these prized game fish, with the Bruneau River and its tributaries offering chances to catch native redbands up to 15 inches in length.

The Bruneau flows north into Idaho and an expanse of public lands administered by the BLM. There, it meets the Jarbidge River and continues north until it flows into the Snake River south of Mountain Home, Idaho. The Bruneau River system is the only watershed in southern Idaho with intact native fisheries, which can be found all the way to Hot Creek, about 10 miles upstream of the Snake River confluence. The Idaho section of the river is popular with rafters, who often fish for trout while floating through the Bruneau's scenic canyons.

Despite the genetic integrity and recreational importance of...
trout in the Bruneau, summer water temperatures and stream flows are a limiting factor for these fish living in the semi-arid, high desert environment north of their Nevada origins. This problem would be exacerbated if the Bruneau’s backcountry headwaters were roaded and developed. Periods of drought and ongoing irrigation are believed to have adversely affected this fishery in certain areas, making the long-term conservation of the Bruneau River’s cold backcountry headwater streams an important objective in securing the populations’ long-term survival.

Fortunately, strong national roadless rules that conserve Nevada’s backcountry benefit Silver State sportsmen, who fish the upper reaches of the Bruneau, as well as Idaho anglers, who seek redbands downstream of the state line. Responsive backcountry management helps maintain the cool water temperatures and summer stream flows necessary to support this important trout fishery throughout the watershed.

Consistent roadless rules are crucial for sustaining productive fish and wildlife populations and hunting and angling opportunities across state lines.
The Warner Mountains run north and south for 85 miles in northeast California and south-central Oregon, just east of Goose Lake and the Pit River. The Warners are a Great Basin mountain range, home to free-ranging herds of mule deer and Rocky Mountain elk.

On both sides of the Oregon and California border, a 48,000-acre complex of roadless areas provides important habitat security adjacent to heavily roaded areas. Shared between the two states are the Crane Mountain (24,369 acres) and Mt. Bidwell (16,135 acres) roadless areas, while the Mt. Vida Roadless Area (7,771 acres) is located entirely in California just south of the border. The national forest is bordered by private land and BLM-administered public lands.

At 9,892 feet, Eagle Peak is the highest point in the Warners. Crane Mountain tops the border roadless areas at 8,456 feet and is arguably the most scenic part of the Oregon Warners, with extensive stands of aspens and wet meadows. Vegetation throughout the range includes ponderosa pine and white pine at the higher elevations, aspen in the drainages, and juniper communities at the lower elevations.

Since the 1950s, the Warner Mountains have been known for high-quality mule deer hunting. Sportsmen can try for years before successfully drawing an X Zone deer tag. In Oregon, the Warner Unit long has been a desirable mule deer hunting unit in the southern part of the state. Hunters who do their homework know that the backcountry lands along the California and Oregon border are one of the better places to find a mature buck in the Warner Mountains.

While demand for hunting in the Warners remains high, declines in the deer herd over the past two decades have limited hunter opportunity and worried wildlife managers. The proliferation of noxious weeds, juniper encroachment and poor habitat security from increased motorized use, fire suppression and predation are blamed.

In response to the declines in the Warners and other areas, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in 2009 launched the Mule Deer Initiative, an active management effort focused on increasing mule deer numbers in eastern Oregon. The program targets five wildlife management units, one of which is the Warner Unit.
The ODFW has identified reducing national forest open road densities and managing motorized travel as recommended steps for recovering mule deer populations in the Warners, where road densities currently average 3.1 miles of road per square mile. While access is important, excessive road densities have been shown to decrease mule deer and elk survival during hunting season while increasing opportunities for wildlife harassment, from minor feeding disturbances to poaching.

Fortunately, the complex of roadless areas on both sides of the Oregon and California border already provides secure habitat for the area’s big-game herds, allowing bucks to escape hunting pressure in the fall and offering sportsmen opportunities to pursue wildlife in solitude. Combined with the active management priorities being pursued by the ODFW, conserving the remaining roadless areas will help ensure that mule deer are able to find escape cover during hunting seasons.

Safeguarding roadless areas on the Oregon side will benefit not only mule deer and Beaver State sportsmen: California hunters also stand to gain. The mule deer herds of the Warners are migratory, and telemetry studies show that a portion of the California deer migrates to Oregon to overwinter. Roadless areas provide important security for migrating deer that cross through the border region into Oregon before heading northeast to their winter range east of the Warner Mountains.

Mule deer bucks likely cross back and forth over the border during the summer and fall months, using the escape cover provided by the backcountry lands. Upholding system-wide roadless rules that conserve these areas gives hunters some certainty that mature age-class bucks will continue to roam the high country, providing chances for sportsmen to harvest the mule deer of a lifetime.
Nathan Covala fishing the Bruneau River in Nevada not far from the Idaho border.

Photo by Joel Webster