

Wellington Wildlands or wilderness?

BY DAVID CALAHAN

The 1964 Wilderness Act defines wilderness as a place of 5,000 acres minimum, with “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.”

Under that definition, the 5,711-acre Wellington Wildlands (WWL) more than qualifies for the protections afforded to a “land with wilderness characteristics.” This area, now in jeopardy, is worth fighting for.

WWL is visible from Ruch, Applegate, and Thompson Creek. Many Applegaters drive by it regularly. At 3,705 feet, Wellington Butte stands sentry at the center of this nine-square-mile intact block of undisturbed naturalness and diversity. Comprised of the public lands north of Highway 238 between China Gulch and Humbug Creek, with the Forest Creek ridgeline as its northeastern boundary, it is largely made up of dry, steep south-facing slopes covered in manzanita, buckbrush, madrone, and oaks. At the mountain's feet lie two shaded seasonal creeks, Long Gulch and Balls Branch, with year-round springs to sustain its hidden diverse flora and fauna. Each drainage contains approximately 300 acres of giant Douglas firs and ponderosa pines, the largest remaining intact stands of low-elevation old-growth forests in the Applegate Valley.

Maybe it was economics that kept old-timers from punching roads into both canyons to log the scattered patches of timber. It was a long way to build roads, and there were much easier pickings elsewhere. In 1931 a fierce wind-driven fire raced out of Humbug Creek, across the wildlands, and headed to Jacksonville. Fire

is a cleanser and rejuvenator, a good thing overall, and this one served to keep roads and loggers at bay for another 70 years.

In 2001, despite strong public resistance, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) included half of the wildlands in the Ferris Bugman Timber Sale. But ten miles of new roads, helicopter logging, marginal scattered sites, potentially poor return, a pending lawsuit, and a determined public are off-putting to timber companies. BLM tried to sell Ferris Bugman three times to no avail.

In 2011, BLM identified 5,711 acres as the Wellington Butte Lands with Wilderness Characteristics (LWC). In 2013, WWL was proposed as a Primitive Backcountry Area in the Wyden/Merkley O&C Act. However, BLM's recent (August 2016) Final Resource Management Plan *denied* the best two of four southern Oregon LWC candidates, WWL and Dakubutede (in the Little Applegate). In both cases BLM argued that there is too much timber. Once they complete constructing roads and logging, neither area will qualify for future protection. Therefore, less than one percent of the 148,000 acres that BLM manages in the Applegate received LWC status.

What makes the WWL unique today, besides its size, is the intact nature and close proximity to private lands and major urban populations. Medford, Jacksonville, and Grants Pass are all less than 30 minutes away. Designated wilderness areas usually entail a long drive to high elevations and extremely rugged terrain. Additionally, this incredibly scenic area is the centerpiece



Wellington Butte is prominent in this aerial photo of the southern side of the Wellington Wildlands area. Photo: Scott Harding.

for the next phase of the Applegate Ridge Trail (ART), the Center ART, which will meander through the wildlands to link the recently completed East ART to Humbug Creek. Continuing on, the West ART will traverse high Applegate slopes all the way to the Cathedral Hills Trail System south of Grants Pass.

BLM is now working to produce the Middle Applegate Timber Sale, which likely will include logging the WWL. Currently, management is the biggest threat to the wildlands and, if allowed, will alter the natural characteristics so that the WWL would never again be considered a wilderness. BLM's history is burdened with examples of misguided management, the results of decisions coming from Washington, DC, and timber-company interests.

On a local level, our objective will be to convince BLM that this area is far more valuable left intact for recreation, for

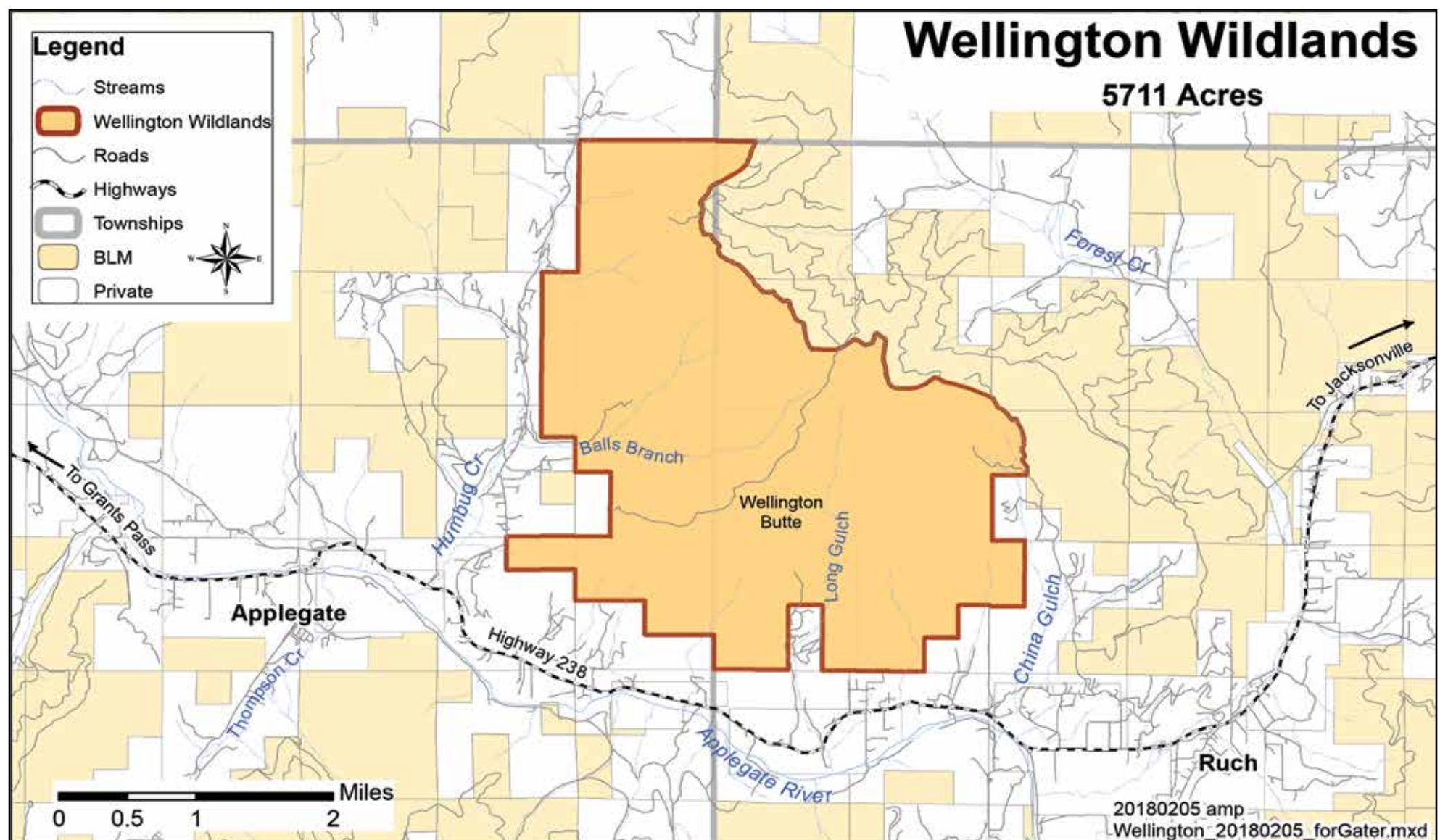
the use and enjoyment of the American people, and as a legacy to pass to our children. Economics will again play a role. If necessary, we may need to convince BLM or the timber companies that there will be too much resistance to log it.

In reality, WWL is a wildland, a roadless area, and a wilderness. But only Congress can designate a “Wilderness.” Whatever the name, this Applegate gem needs our protection!

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ATA is a nonprofit organization with the primary mission of building a hiking, biking, and equestrian trail from Jacksonville to Grants Pass. It is unanimous: we would rather bike through a wilderness than in a logged landscape. “Thank God, they cannot cut down the clouds!” —Henry David Thoreau.

Map by Annette Parsons.



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