

II. Wallowa County Profile and Fire History

Profile¹

Wallowa County, Oregon's far northeastern county, shares state boundaries with both Washington and Idaho. The county is mostly mountainous and forms the headwaters of several important tributaries to the Columbia/Snake River System. About 3/5 of the land area in Wallowa County is publicly owned, including lands administered by a variety of federal, state, and local agencies. Most public land is part of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and is administered by the United States Forest Service (USFS). The Wallowa-Whitman National Forest includes three wilderness areas and one national recreation area.

The Eagle Cap Wilderness, which lies along the County's southwestern border, is noted for its high mountain lakes and its peaks nearing 10,000 feet. The Wenaha Wilderness lies to the northwest and is noted for its deer and elk hunting, as well as backpacking adventures. The newest wilderness area is the Hells Canyon Wilderness, along the eastern boundary of the county. This forms the Oregon-Idaho boundary. This wilderness is buffered within the much larger Hells Canyon National Recreation Area.



Figure 1: Eagle Cap Wilderness, Photo Courtesy of David Jensen

Wallowa County is home to four incorporated cities: Wallowa, Lostine, Enterprise (county seat) and Joseph. These cities are nestled in the Wallowa Valley along Highway 82. At the end of the highway, the famous Wallowa Lake provides a destination for the majority of the county's tourism industry. This pristine glacier-formed lake draws in an annual average of 74,220 visitors for camping, lodging, fishing, boating, hiking and horseback riding in the Eagle Cap Wilderness each summer. The day-use recreation average is 780,279 for the Minam area and forest trails within the State Park coverage area.² This excludes the numbers collected by the USFS within the wilderness area.

The Nez Perce Tribe aboriginally occupied a territory that encompassed virtually all of what is now north central Idaho as well as extensive portions of what is now northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington. Wallowa County has a long history of Native American influence, having specifically the Wallowa Band of the Nez Perce once making the Wallowa Valley their home for hunting, fishing, and gathering. They followed changing seasons to headwaters of rivers and high

¹ Wallowa County, Oregon: A Strategic Plan for the Future, August 5, 1996.

² Wallowa Lake State Park and Management Area, Statistics captured from 1998-2002.

mountains of the Wallowas in the summer and returned to deep canyons of the Snake River and its tributaries in winter.³ Included in recognizing the homeland and lands identified in the Walla Walla Council Treaty of 1855, the Nez Perce National Historic Trail, which starts at Wallowa Lake, is also a value important to Wallowa County.

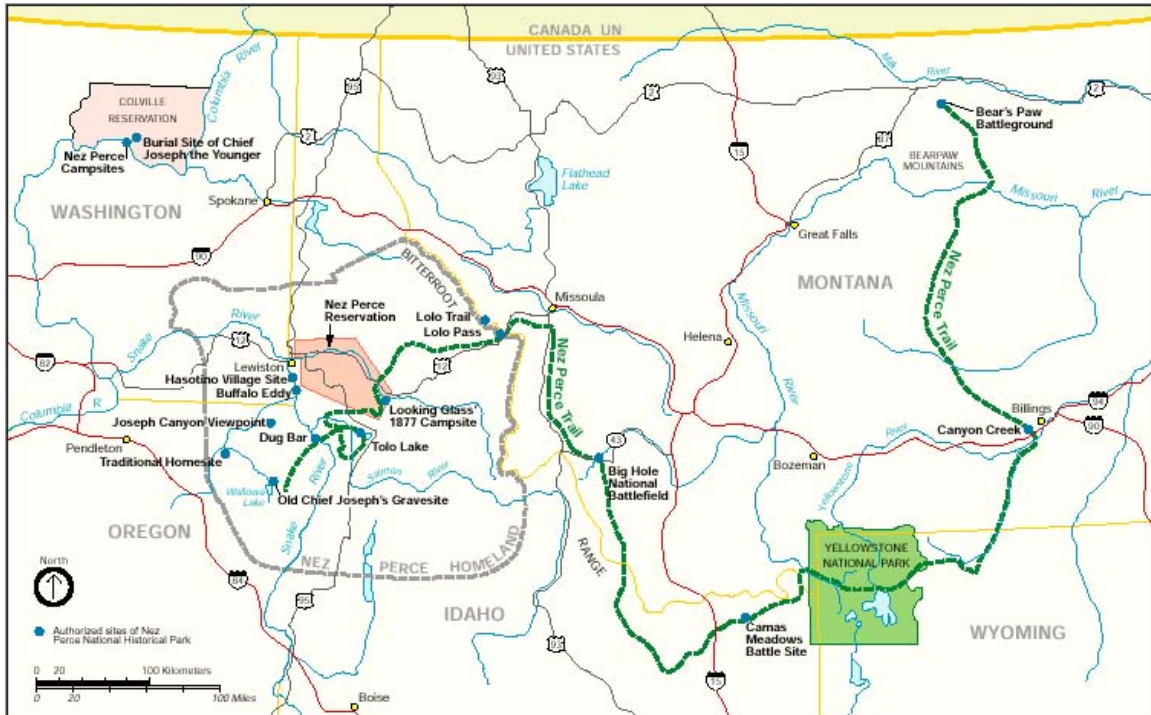


Figure 2: Courtesy of <http://www.nezperce.org>

The recreational, ecological and scenic values that draw tourists to Wallowa County are the same values that the residents of Wallowa County want to protect from the risk of wildfire. Other important values to the communities of Wallowa County are: concerns about public safety and protection of the local economy (e.g., forestry, agriculture, arts and recreation). Wallowa County has already experienced several large fires over the course of the last 5 years that have affected those values, including Eastside Complex, Carrol Creek, Horse Creek, Lightning Creek Complex, Anniversary, and several **wildland fire use (WFU)** fires in the wilderness.

Fire History in Wallowa County

Fires are recorded separately by the responding agency. Wildland fires that start on protected private land is reported by ODF. However, ODF will respond to and report fires that are on unprotected lands that threaten protected lands, or on dual-protected lands where ODF provides mutual aid with structural fire

³ <http://www.wallowanezperce.org>

departments. (Federal agencies also record fires they respond to in a separate database.) Fire cause is categorized into human or lightning. Wallowa County has a significant amount of lightning storms that pass through during the summer and fall months, leaving prevention of those fire starts beyond human control. Over 3/4 of all fire starts are attributed to lightning, with a higher percentage of lightning starts on the public lands (85% average for the last 5 years) than the private lands (72% average for the last 5 years). ODF reports a slightly higher percentage of human causes where human activity is more prevalent (see Appendix A - Fire Statistics).

The Wallowa Mountains office of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest reports similar fire statistics. The 5-year average for lightning-caused fires is 85% of all fires in this period, while 15% were human-caused. Wallowa County also has USFS-protected land in the Eden Bench/Troy area that is protected and managed by the Walla Walla Ranger District of the Umatilla National Forest. Statistics for those fires were not available at the time this plan was submitted for print.⁴ Large fires closely correlate with multiple ignition days (more than 7 starts in one day).

⁴ Once statistics for fires reported by the Walla Walla Ranger District are available, they will be posted on the web and included in the third printing of this document. Also, fire statistics for structural fire agencies were not available in a form that could be included with other agency fires, but an attempt will be made to do that by the third printing of this document.