



Figure 1. Located 49 miles southeast of Bend in Central Oregon, Fort Rock State Monument was designated a national natural landmark in 1976 for its "striking...circular, fort-like volcanic outcrop." The site is owned by the State of Oregon and administered by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

The National Natural Landmarks Program: A progress report

By CRAIG L. SHAFER

Administered by the National Park Service and established in 1962, the National Natural Landmark (NNL) Program recognizes and encourages protection of nationally significant natural areas in the United States (figure 1). Sites must exemplify a biotic community or geologic feature that is one of the best of its type in its physiographic region. Sites are designated on both public and private lands.

As many readers know, site designations were under an NPS-imposed moratorium from November 1989 to May 1999. The moratorium was lifted on May 12, 1999, when new NNL program regulations were published in the *Federal Register*. The moratorium had been expected to last only a few years. Why did it last ten? Primarily because obtaining all essential, official sign-offs was impossible. This delay was a reaction to pervasive private land rights political ideology. Officials who are mindful of the potential political consequences of actions of the Department of the Interior apparently did not wish to add fuel to this fire.

The decade needed to finalize program improvements was tumultuous. Public hearings on the regulations were held, new administrations with differing ideologies came on board, successive freezes on government regulations were imposed, new regulation writing requirements were

put in effect, and so on. Park Service staff, in coordination with the Office of the Solicitor, the Department of the Interior, the Office of Management and Budget, the Secretary's Advisory Board, and others, considered public comments and revised the regulations. Anne Frondorf, now with the U.S. Geological Survey, and Bill Commins, with the National Park Service, were key to summarizing public comments, achieving consensus on most regulation decisions, drafting regulation language, and initiating other program improvements. By 1993, program staff had prepared a handbook, contacted NNL owners and verified their names and addresses, improved the electronic database, and had gotten program controls approved. Additionally, hundreds of Congressional inquiries and Freedom of Information Act requests were answered; eight annual *Section 8 Reports*, required by legislation (HR 94-458), on threatened and damaged national natural landmarks were sent to the Congress and distributed around the country; six NPS national program meetings were held; program files were organized and archived; natural region theme study inventories were made available through the National Technical Information Service; program literature was updated; a *Section 9 Report* (surface mining threats) was prepared; and more.

The program also made progress in FY1992 when the National Park Service secured an additional \$775,000 and four FTEs (i.e., full-time staff) for the program. The program was then able to pay the salaries of two Washington Office staff and 10 regional coordinators. The regional coordinators oversee the annual *Section 8 Report* inspections, fund some special projects using the NPS Challenge Cost Share Program, assure that development planners consider NNLs, publish newsletters, convene public meetings, participate in NNL ceremonies and media events, testify at public hearings, write responses to newspaper editorials, draft news releases, enlist support for endangered species issues, guide EIS preparation, present NNL plaques to landowners, and communicate with NNL property owners. They also assisted with key moratorium tasks—the handbook, owner identification, and database improvement. When the Park Service reorganized in 1995, the future of the program was unknown. After the dust settled, the program budget and all 12 support positions remained intact.

After being published last May, the new NNL regulations were mailed to approximately 2,279 NNL landowners, mostly private. Another mailing went to those holding multiple NNL properties, such

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as federal and state agencies and private conservation organizations. (For those NNLs with more than 50 owners, staff notified landowners using local newspaper announcements.) The mailings included the regulations, a brochure, and a letter from the Director of the National Park Service. The letter encouraged continued participation in the program but informed landowners of a 90-day opportunity to withdraw their property from NNL designation. In all, the Park Service received 971 requests for withdrawal of properties from NNL designation a month after the September 9 deadline, and they continued to be received. The vast majority of these requests, some 741, occurred in just three areas (Baraboo Range, WI; Lance Creek Fossil Area, WY; and Canaan Valley, WV), and were the result of locally generated misinformation about the NNL Program coupled with existing local resentment stemming from other past or present government activities. Withdrawal requests are being processed. Because not all NNL landowners could be reached, additional withdrawal opportunities and mailings are being considered.

The new regulations clarify the role of the federal government in designating NNLs and managing the program. They also address landowner concerns. For example, three owner notifications will occur including the opportunity to voice concerns during a public comment period; no owner need have the designation against his or her wishes, any possible land use ramifications are discussed; benefits of the designation are outlined; written permission from the landowner must be secured before evaluating a site on private property; and so on. After all withdrawal requests have been processed and boundary alterations made, the program can resume designations. This is the method used to pursue the program goals established in 1962: identifying, recognizing, and encouraging preservation of special ecological and geological sites, enhancing their scientific and educational value, strengthening cultural appreciation of natural history, and involving individuals, private organizations, and all levels of government in a cooperative undertaking to conserve the country's natural heritage.

The 1996 "sunset legislation" targeted dozens of "unnecessary" government reports for elimination, including the *Section 8 Report*. Sent annually to Congress, this report identified NNLs (and National Historic Landmarks) that were threatened or damaged. Since the New Year, the legal mandate to send the *Section 8 Report* to Congress has expired. This report, given to the Congress 20 times since 1977, helped prevent many NNLs from being damaged or lost. Few realize that four NNLs, reviewed in the *Section 8 Report*, were later added to the national park system. Without this formal reporting mechanism, future problems with NNL sites may not come to the attention of as many parties as occurred in the past. Fortunately, the mandate was reinserted in HR 3002, being considered by the Senate. Without this mandate, many of the last, best examples of the country's various ecological and geological features may vanish because of pressing demands for "progress."

In 1987, Edward O. Wilson, a famous Harvard biology professor, became the academic community's leading advocate for preserving "biodiversity." In his 1992 book *The Diversity of Life*, Wilson argued that the day will come when the flora and fauna of a country will be thought part of its natural heritage, just as important as its art or language. The founders of the National Natural Landmarks Program in 1963 were not so eloquent, simply noting the importance of preserving sites that illustrate the ecological and geological character of the country. However, they apparently recognized that retaining NNLs, which by definition possess "national significance," provided a benefit to all citizens. Program staff will continue to address problems with the program as they arise and encourage landowners to preserve their NNL properties. **P_S**

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