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Late 'Forest Service legend' gains agency recognition
Wellner Cliffs Research Natural Area is a tribute to
Charles Wellner, a longtime Moscow resident

Former Moscow resident Chales A. Wellner, who spent more than 60 years as a U.S. Forest Service forester and volunteer, devoted years to identifying and helping preserve unique and undistrubed ecological areas known as research natural areas.

Now the Forest Service has honored Wellner, who died in 2001, by naming a research area for him.

The Wellner Cliffs Research natural Area was established last month by the Forest Service in tribute to Wellner and his accomplishments. "Chuck Wellner was a real legend in the Forest Service" said Steve Shelly, regional botanist and RNA coordinator at Missoula. "This RNA is the only one of the more than 100 in Idaho to be named in remembrance for a person. There was no opposition to that since it was a legacy for Chuck."

The Wellner Cliffs RNA is located along Canyon Creek, within the Priest River Experimental Forest, about 13 north of the town of Priest River. The 307 - acre site includes the wet cedar/hemlock forest common to the area and a series of cliffs, dry slopes and dryland forests.

With this designation, the Forest Service will maintina the site in its present undisturbed state. No motorized entry, livestock grazing, firewood gathering, logging or development will be allowed.

Wellner initially identified this area as a unique resource and first proposed the establishment of an RNA there in 1976. In 1997, Dennis Ferguson, research forester at the Forest Services's Rocky Mountain Research Station at Moscow, began assembling the information needed for an RNA establishment report. Ferguson started calling the area Wellner Cliffs in his reporting.

"It was an indirect way of getting Chuck's name on this," Ferguson said. We all knew the area was a real favorite of Chuck's, and we all respected him and what he had done. So everyone just agreed that it was appropriate to put Chuck's name on that site."

Ferguson guided the report process, gathering both the relevant information and the required signatures for eight years until the RNA was created.

“I’m real happy with the result,” Ferguson said. “This RNA is a tribute to Chuck Wellner and the outstanding contribution he made to the RNA program in this region.”

Wellner began working as a Forest Service silviculturist in Idaho in 1933. Recognizing that the forests were changing quickly because of human incursion, he worked to protect ecologically unique areas by establishing RNAs, both as a silviculturalist and after his retirement in 1973 as a volunteer.

Wellner was instrumental in identifying and nominating more than 200 RNAs in the Rocky Mountain West region, Ferguson said.

Virtually all of Idaho’s 113 RNAs were established as a result of Wellner’s reports. As a result of his work, Idaho has the most extensive RNA network on federal lands of any state.

“Preserving these parcels of unique land was Chuck’s mission,” Ferguson said.

Scientists need to have places like RNAs where natural processes are allowed to continue without disturbance, Ferguson said. In order to understand water quality, for example it is important to have undisturbed streams to compare to similar creeks in logged areas. The RNAs also serve as gene banks, or storehouses of native species, that can be studied as needed.

In addition to the research use, RNAs are valuable for education, to show students the ecological relationships of an undisturbed system. Visitors are allowed to hike in and through RNAs so the areas have recreational use as well.

Anyone interested in visiting the Wellner Cliffs RNA can contact the Forest Service’s Rocky Mountain Research Station at Moscow for directions.

(accompanied by a photo of Charles Wellner with the caption: Charles Wellner jots down notes while on a trip to the Nez Perce National Forest in 1982. Wellner died in 2001.)