The United States Congress designated the Hells Canyon Wilderness in 1975 and it now has a total of 217,927 acres. Idaho contains approximately 83,811 acres. Oregon contains approximately 134,116 acres. It is managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service.

Hells Canyon Wilderness is a subset of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA), which straddles the border of northeastern Oregon and western Idaho. Split into two distinct halves by the Wild & Scenic Snake River, approximately one-third of HCNRA is designated Wilderness.

On the Oregon side, the higher elevation areas are characteristic of rocky slopes and grasslands laced with ‘stringer canyons’ and groves composed of Douglas fir and ponderosa pine. The lower elevations are dominated by grassland benches with steep canyons and ravines dissecting the isolated Oregon-side. Two National trails are found at various elevations: Western Rim/Summit Ridge Recreation Trail at the upper elevation, and Nez Perce Historic Trail near the Snake River. Species of interest are Rocky Mountain Elk, bighorn sheep, mule deer, and chukar.