

Minutes

Crook County Natural Resources Committee

December 13, 2023

Committee Members Present: Bill McCormack, Frank Porfily, Mike Lunn, Tim Deboodt, Kim Vogel, Steve McGuire, Lynne Breese, Cliff Kiser, Melinda Kestler, Casey Kaiser

Members Absent: Andy Gallagher

Guests Present: Lisa Clark (BLM), Kim Molnar (Director of Tourism, Crook County Chamber of Commerce)

Public Present: Gayle Hunt, John Breese, Jenna Deibel, Eric Newell, Kim Molnar

Meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Chair Steve McGuire @ COCC Crook County Open Campus

Pledge of Allegiance

Minutes: Lynne Breese moved to approve the minutes of the November 8, 2023 meeting as presented. Bill McCormack seconded. Motion passed.

Agency Reports:

Lisa Clark (Area Manager, Deschutes Field Office – BLM) provided the updates for the Prineville BLM District. Hiring of staff continues, with both administrative as well as field positions being filled. Notable hires include 2 new range conservationists for the Deschutes Field office as well as assistant field managers for both Resource areas. Cliff Kiser asked about the Reality positions being field, wondering what some of their job duties are. Lisa responded that these positions deal with land transfers, right of way designations and leases (i.e. communication facilities) on public lands. Mike asked what has changed that has allowed BLM to increase the rate of hiring. Lisa attributed some of the current activity to changes in HR processes, procedures and policies.

Frank asked for an update on the solar applications, Millican area. Lisa said they are on hold and are ranked low priority from a workload standpoint due to the availability of staff time. Lisa said they (the local office) did provide input to the Programmatic NEPA for Solar development in the western states. There has been no response from the National team working on this NEPA project on timelines for next steps. Cliff asked Lisa to keep the Committee informed if BLM hears anything and to suggest to the Committee how they can stay engaged in this decision making process.

Lisa did mention that she hopes to initiate a Crook County EA process in fiscal year 2024-25 which could include a number of decision making opportunities regarding land management in the western part of the County.

John Breese asked about sage grouse recovery efforts and the opportunity to control predators (primarily ravens). Lisa mentioned that BLM is addressing this concern in part through perch removal (control of juniper) in sage grouse areas.

Frank asked if BLM was doing any sagebrush control these days. Lisa mentioned that through prescribed fire, BLM is able to control sagebrush density and patch size. BLM is trying to prevent the catastrophic loss of large landscapes of sagebrush for sage grouse habitat.

Steve asked about E-bikes and their use on BLM managed lands. Lisa said E-bikes are classified as motorized unless the local land management agency approves their use through an EA. An example of this is the La Pine Trail System. Lisa mentioned that they are currently planning to start public scoping for the Horse Ridge Trail System in February. This process will help to create the decision notice for this areas. Class I and II e-bikes (pedal assist) are the only e-bikes under consideration.

The Forest Service report was placed into the record by Steve. Cliff mentioned that it appears the work at Walton Lake Campground has been able to expand beyond the Unit 2 area as discussed during the October meeting.

Gayle Hunt mentioned that in regards to the Forest Service Wild Horse Management Plan, there will be notice of intent to appeal the decision coming within the next couple of weeks. Tim mentioned a recent news article mentioning some federal dollars are now available to NGO's and other organizations who are assisting federal agencies in the management of wild horses. He will send the link to the article to Committee members.

Committee Reports:

Mike Lunn provided the sub-committee report on filling Committee member vacancies. Mike, Bill and Kim were on this sub-committee to review applications. Mike reported that there were 6 applications with one being ineligible due to not being a resident of Crook County. 5 of the applications were reviewed for 4 potential appointments. 3 of the applications were seeking reappointment, 2 were new applicants.

Mike reported that the sub-committee recommends the 3 renewals be forwarded to the Court for appointment. Those individuals are Steve McGuire, Lynne Breese and Frank Porfily. In reviewing the other 2 applications, the sub-committee recommends Calista Songstad to be approved for the Court's consideration. During discussion, Cliff mentioned that it would be nice to have had the new applicants attend the NRAC meetings ahead of time.

Bill moved to send 4 applicant names to the Court for their consideration and appointment. Those names are Steve McGuire, Lynne Breese, Frank Porfily, and Calista Songstad. Cliff seconded. Motion passed.

Business discussion:

Kim Molnar, Tourism Director for the Crook County Chamber of Commerce was present to introduce herself and the new tourism program of the Chamber. The program being implemented will focus on growing tourism within the County while working to preserve the heritage and culture of the County. The program will look for opportunities that add economic benefit to the community through public engagement of the community. Cliff asked how agriculture and forestry might be incorporated into these efforts. Kim mentioned that through brainstorming, ideas around a festival like effort that includes those industries could be developed. There are some opportunities to expand the existing agro-tourism activities already in place throughout the County. Cliff thought that expanding educational

information about these industries to visiting tourists would help improve their knowledge of the role of livestock production in the west. Kim Vogel expressed her appreciation to Kim Molnar for attending and hoped that she would continue to come. Kim also expressed her appreciation that this tourism effort does include working within the custom and culture of the community. Melinda added to the discussion stating that Crook County is a working landscape, different from Deschutes. She mentioned that added traffic on our roads at times creates conflict between tourism and agricultural operations (moving equipment on the highways).

Casey Kaiser mentioned how tourism interfaces with the community. A need to balance dispersed recreational activities with organized recreation and to limit impacts. Casey said he believe most people are more comfortable in organized recreation (camp grounds) than they are with dispersed camping. Just a comfort level they have (safety).

Good of the Order:

Lynne Breese provide the group with an impact story of how the Master Naturalist program (an OSU Extension program) which trains volunteers in the arena of natural resources. The story was how recent participants from Bend (Awbrey Butte) had taken information about juniper management and were able to incorporate that information into changes of their homeowners' association by-laws. The new changes allow the homeowners to remove juniper trees from their property without first getting permission from the HOA.

Mike moved to adjourn. Cliff seconded. Meeting was adjourned at 2:45 p.m.



Crook County Natural Resources Advisory Committee

Ochoco National Forest & Crooked River National Grassland

December 13th, 2023

PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

The fall prescribed burning season is complete and the Ochoco National Forest (ONF) treated over 6,000 acres. Treatments included blacklining in the Maury Mountains, underburning in the Jackson Unit to the east of Big Summit Prairie, and pile burning in the McKay Units west of the Mill Creek Wilderness. For more information on prescribed burning practices and updates, please visit www.centraloregonfire.org.

WILDFIRE CRISIS STRATEGY

The Forest Service has launched a robust, 10-year strategy to squarely address this wildfire crisis in the places where it poses the most immediate threats to communities. The strategy, called “Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America’s Forests,” combines a historic investment of congressional funding with years of scientific research and planning into a national effort that will dramatically increase the scale of forest health treatments over the next decade. Central Oregon was chosen as one of 10 initial landscapes selected to receive \$131 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) investment to begin implementation of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) in 2022.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) of 2021 calls for reducing wildfire risk on 10 million acres of National Forest System lands by 2027. Funding from the BIL and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) are being directed at fuels reduction projects in priority landscapes including the Central Oregon Investment Landscape that includes the Deschutes National Forest and the Crooked River National Grassland (CRNG). ONF specialists are undertaking planning for fuels reduction across the Grassland in response to the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. The ONF will issue a proposed action for the Lower Bridge Fuels Reduction and Habitat Resilience Project this week. Located on the western side of the CRNG, the project will involve juniper thinning, piling, and burning as well as native shrub and grass planting and seeding. ONF staff have just begun assessing the second planning area, the Central Fuels Reduction and Habitat Resilience Project, for which National Environmental Policy Act planning (NEPA) will begin in 2024.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Williams Prairie Restoration

Williams Prairie (the Prairie) is a 560-acre meadow located approximately 25 miles east of Prineville, OR, on the Paulina Ranger District of the Ochoco National Forest. The North Fork of the Crooked River originates and runs through the Prairie. Over many years of manipulation by both private and Federal entities the Prairie had primarily been dewatered with ditches and gullies and the NF Crooked River no longer ran through a lush, wet prairie.

The Prairie restoration work started on July 10th, 2023, and was completed on September 29th, 2023. The project focused on restoring 4.5 miles of degraded stream gullies and ditches, over two miles of valley length. Primary objectives were to 1) fill degraded gullies and ditches with earthen material to bring the shallow ground water table closer to the valley surface, 2) remove a 350 ft long by 12 ft tall earthen dam 3) improve the existing AOP and add 3 additional valley culverts on the Forest Road (FR) 4225-050 road crossing 4) restore native





Forest Road 22 Reconstruction Project (funded by the *Federal Land Transportation Program*)

The Federal Highways Administration will be prioritizing critical locations for partial reconstruction and/or overlay on FR 22 between the junction of FR 42 and Walton Lake Campground. Complete reconstruction of this road is warranted; however, the existing funding is for \$1,000,000 in construction funds. The Federal Highway Administration, Western Federal Lands Highway Division (FHWA-WFL) and the Forest Service completed the environmental review and NEPA documentation in August 2023. FHWA-WFL will be responsible for completing the design and construction which is expected to begin in 2024.

Motor Vehicle Use Map Information

Our Engineering staff, together with our Natural Resources, Recreation, Range, and Visitor Information Services teams are in the process of making substantial updates to our Motor Vehicle Use Maps (MVUMs). This is a comprehensive effort to ensure our official information on maps is not only accurate, but also signed property on the Forest and Grassland. This will be implemented on a rolling basis which began this summer with new carsonite posts, new kiosks, updated kiosks, re-signing road signs that have excessive wear, etc. in addition to posting and printing updated maps in the spring of 2024.

PROJECT PLANNING UPDATES

Walton Lake Restoration Project - *The Forest Service Prevails in the 9th Circuit*

Following years of court briefings and hearings, the District Court and 9th Circuit Court of Appeals have ruled in the Forest Service's favor. Though the appellants Blue Mountains Biodiversity Project have filed a request for an *en banc* rehearing in the 9th Circuit, in the absence of an injunction, the Forest has moved ahead with implementation. A contractor has completed tree falling in the units infested with laminated root rot. Non-commercial thinning of small conifers throughout the campground units will begin this winter, as weather allows. The reforestation effort will begin next spring with planting of ponderosa pine and western larch. Additional work in the project area will be undertaken as funds become available.

Mill Creek Restoration Project

The ONF's Mill Creek Dry Forest Restoration Project (Mill Creek) was developed with the intent of actively managing conifer stands to restore historic composition, structure, and density; reducing activity generated and naturally occurring fuels; and restoring streams, floodplains, and Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas (RHCA). The project area is located on the Lookout Mountain Ranger District east of Prineville, Oregon, adjacent to the Mill Creek Wilderness. The project area is approximately 36,485 acres in size. The Forest completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) to disclose the effects of four alternatives, with commercial harvest ranging from 7,328 to 8,960 acres. The EA was issued on August 16th for a 30-day public comment period. Fourteen letters were received. Following consideration of the comments received, the Forest will issue a final environmental assessment and draft Decision Notice soon, which will be subject to a 45-day objection period.

North Fork Crooked River Resiliency Project

The Paulina Ranger District is proposing landscape restoration with the North Fork Crooked River Forest Resilience Project including commercial and noncommercial thinning, prescribed fire, and road system changes. The larger "planning area" includes about 37,554 acres (although activities are only proposed across about 10,000 acres) and is located about 31 miles east of Prineville, Oregon, and 9 miles north of Paulina, Oregon. The proposed action was scoped with the public in September 2022. The interdisciplinary (ID) Team used scoping comments to develop an alternative. The draft environmental assessment was released for a 30-day comment

