

Minutes

Crook County Natural Resources Committee

January 10, 2024

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

Members Absent: Guests Present: Shane Jeffries (FS), Eric Klann (City of Prineville), Susan Hermrick (County County Commissioner)

Public Present: John Breese, Eric Newell, Jodie Barram

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

Pledge of Allegiance

Minutes: Bill McCormack moved to approve the minutes of the December 13, 2023 meeting as presented. Frank Porfily seconded. Motion passed.

New Committee Member Calista Songstad was introduced to the Committee. She along with Committee members Steve McGuire, Lynne Breese and Frank Profily were appointed to a 4 year term by the County Court on January 3rd, 2024.

Agency Reports: Shane Jeffries, Forest Supervisor, Ochoco National Forest provided the FS update. Handout included. Shane returned to the Ochoco NF back in November. He had been on a Region 4 assignment as the acting regional Deputy Forester. The Forest continues to gear up for the implementation of the Wildfire Strategy. The Grasslands (along with the entire Deschutes National Forest) is part of a selected, 21 landscapes to prioritize, address and make an impact on wildfire risk. The grasslands presents a unique challenge with a very large number boundary (miles) with other land ownerships. The FS is working on coordination strategies with these adjoining landownerships as they address the wildfire risks and implement restoration opportunities.

Region 6 has a new Regional Forester, Jacque Buchanan, effective January 14, 2024. She comes to the PNW from Colorado where she was working in Region 2. She has a strong background in fire management.

Since the Dispatch Center has moved to the Redmond Air Center, the FS has been working on creating a Rappel Center at the Prineville Airport. The FS has also been working on improving the facilities at the FS compound located on Lamonta. FS has received the go-ahead to construct new buildings there to deal with workforce needs. Design of the project is 90% complete, with construction to begin once budget authorization has been received.

35 acres of treatment has been completed at Walton Lake. This project is dealing with the root-rot issue there and public safety issues. Increasing costs of project implementation have limited how much work can be done now. As additional funding is secured, additional work will be done there.

Cliff Kiser asked if fuel breaks are a part of the treatment plan for the grassland's project? Shane responded saying that the project is incorporating all types of treatments. They are working to ID natural firebreaks and are working with Jefferson County to see how the existing road system can be utilized when reducing fuel loads and concerns with right-of-ways.

Cliff asked if any of the trees being cut down at Walton Lake have value as merchantable trees. Shane indicated that most of the trees have no value for dimensional wood products. There might be some that can be used for biomass if there was a market for that.

Mike Lunn asked about the national effort to define "old" and "Mature" trees and how those decisions would/could impact forest management. Shane said there was on-going discussions and that definitions should be related to the type of forest, not just some general definition. Shane indicated that plans already in place will be modified based on the new policies being developed.

Kim Vogel asked about the changes in National Forest Planning processes and CEQ's regulation changes. Shane said that there was no news on any progress being made. Decisions on Forest Management Planning for the Ochoco are still years away. When it is time, the process will probably be done at the same time with the Deschutes Forest, but will still have 2 different plans. Kim expressed concern about the need to keep the two separate because of different forest types, different uses and different communities of concern.

Frank indicated he was glad to see Shane back and was happy to have him at the meeting today.

No report from BLM

No report from State Parks

Eric Klann, representing the City of Prineville's Biomass project spoke to the Committee and provided them with updates from previous presentations. Current design of the facility is for a 35 megawatt co-generation facility. Once power purchase agreements are obtained and signed, construction is estimated to take 2 years. Cliff asked if the project is projected to pay for itself? Eric responded that that is what the power purchase agreement is all about. If that exists, then it will.

Eric discussed the benefits of biomass utilization for power production along with all the added benefits for addressing forest health, wildfire mitigation, and jobs to name a few. He discussed the differences between solar and biomass power.

The Committee discussed how the County can provide support to the project. It was pointed out that both the Committee and the County have already provided support with letters to the State and Federal government. Some grants have been received and the City is currently looking for an additional \$950,000 of grant support to finalize permitting and design.

Andy Gallagher, committee member and member of the County's Wolf Damage/Compensation Committee provided the Committee with an update. The wolf committee is working to update its compensation schedule for confirmed, killed livestock. In the last 3 months, there have been confirmed livestock kills in Crook County. Currently, the wolf committee is accepting financial claims for 2023 confirmed kills. Landowners have until February, 2024 to turn in reimbursement claims.

Good of the Order:

Kim Vogel asked about the Mill Creek Vegetation Project. Shane indicated that any decision was on hold until all the new policy directions came out. Shane did say that there would be some additional public outreach, specific to adjoining land ownership to explore opportunities for complementary work across ownerships.

Mike Lunn asked about the Bio-char project that had been started in Grant County. No one had any current information.

Public Comment:

John Breese asked about the historic buildings on the FS Lamonta site and would they remain? Shane said they will all be kept and that the project is for new construction.

Jodie Barram, Central Oregon Living with Fire reported that Deschutes County Commissioners were also in support of the City of Prineville's PREP (biomass) project. The Steering Committee of the Living with Fire program will be seeking Jefferson County support as well.

Tim reminded the group that the February meeting will include election of Chair and Vice-Chair positions (1 year terms). Also, trying to get a representative from USFWS to talk about the pending draft management plan for wolves, expected to be released to the public on Feb. 2, 2024.

Kim moved to adjourn. Cliff seconded. Motion passed. Meeting was adjourned at 3:10 p.m.



Crook County Natural Resources Advisory Committee

Ochoco National Forest & Crooked River National Grassland

January 10, 2024

PRESCRIBED BURNING PROGRAM

Firefighters will be completing an additional 100 acres of pile burning across the Forest this spring, in addition to 202 acres of juniper jackpot burning on the Crooked River National Grassland near Skull Hollow and Grizzly Mountain.

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 cultural and sensitive flora and fauna habitat, and 5) protect multiple fens and springs within and around the Prairie.

The project was completed over a 12-week period with a time-and-materials contract which included two excavators, three off-road dump trucks, a D6 dozer and a skidder. Approximately 45,000 cubic yards of material was excavated and transported from high terraces to fill down-cut gullies and ditches. In some areas of the project, gullies and ditches were 8-10 ft deep and 15-20 ft wide. Upon filling some of these areas, a subsurface water table response was witnessed rising as much as 3.5 feet in a few days. Approximately 400 trees were pushed over and placed on portions of the newly graded prairie surface. Upon finishing the project, approximately 10,000 native riparian plants were planted, most of which were sedge plugs and small mats. Additional planting will occur with a contract in the spring of 2024 with a variety of riparian plants native to the site.

ENGINEERING/ROADS

Forest-wide Cattleguard reconstruction and replacement Project (funded by the Great American Outdoors Act)

The Forest Service has awarded a two-year contract for repair and maintenance on approximately 65 cattleguards located across the ONF. Cattleguards were prioritized and selected based on health and safety concerns on our forest system roads that are subject to Highway Safety Act. A few high priority cattleguards on maintenance level 2 roads were also included based on needs identified by ONF range staff. The contract repaired and maintained 24 sites in 2022 and an additional 41 sites in 2023. The work consisted of cleaning out cattleguards, replacing degraded timber bases with concrete bases, replacing wing posts, wing, and object markers, repairing damaged rail sections, installing ripraps, and resurfacing the approaches.

Lamonta Compound: CCC Building Restoration and Fire Facility Construction

In 2022, the Forest completed siding replacement, painting, and exterior restoration of three of the four CCC-era warehouses and storage buildings at the historic Lamonta Compound. The Forest is currently working with different youth education and employment programs to restore a fifth building used to store fire and lookout specific supplies. Another project at the site is a two-phase project to construct an up-to-date fire facility to house the Forest's 100+ fire employees, providing office space, training space, and a ready room to also accommodate visiting fire personnel. The first phase began in the spring of 2023 during which compound utilities were upgraded, and connections to city infrastructure brought up to local and state code, in addition to providing improved employee parking, and upgraded access from both Lamonta and 10th Streets. The second phase, scheduled for 2024, will complete construction of the actual fire operations facility.

First Phase of Forest Road 42 Paving Project Complete (funded by the Great American Outdoors Act)

This three-year project was completed in November. The project focused on work from Forest Road (FR) 4200-300 to the junction with FR 4210 and the area was fully closed while work was underway. The project included milling the existing asphalt, stabilizing the base material to mitigate future frost heave damage, repaving and restriping this section of road along with completing necessary bridge repairs. Contractors also patched asphalt





on FR 42 from the junction with FR 22 to the junction with FR 4210. Striping of the new road surface will take place in the spring of 2024.

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's). 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 Resiliency 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 period which ended on December 1st. As with the Mill project, the Forest will be reviewing and considering public comment before finalizing the EA and issuing a draft Decision Notice for a 45-day objection period.

Corral Flats Equestrian Endurance Ride Trails Project

Corral Flats contains trails and roads that have been used as a permitted annual equestrian endurance event. The Corral Flats Equestrian Endurance Ride Trails Project proposes the designation of approximately 50 miles of trail for equestrians as part of the Forest non-motorized designated trail system. The project is about 25 miles northeast of Prineville on the Paulina Ranger District. The trail routes are coincident with Forest Service system roads (both open and closed) and non-system two-track roads. This project would also involve rehabilitation of areas damaged by OHVs, and improvements of road closures to prevent future damage. Public scoping ended August 7th. Specialists are currently working on analysis and are expected to have had reports completed by October 31st. The draft EA is expected to go out for comment in December 2023.

Ochoco Wild Horse Management Plan

Under Litigation in US District Court of Oregon

The Forest Service completed NEPA for an updated Ochoco Wild Horse Herd Management Plan in May 2021. A lawsuit challenging the new plan was filed in US District Court in October 2021. Following briefing, Magistrate Judge Hallman issued Findings and Recommendations in favor of the Forest Service on all counts on May 12th. The plaintiffs filed objections to the Findings and Recommendations on June 9th. Magistrate Judge Mosman issued Findings and Recommendations all favorable to the Forest Service. The District Court also just ruled in favor of the Forest Service, and we are currently in the 60-day appeal period.

FOREST HEALTH

In the 2022 and 2023 annually conducted aerial insect and disease surveys, Forest Health Protection Staff observed wide-spread grand fir mortality that is believed to be caused by drought stress and fir engraver beetles. The mortality is quite severe in some places but in general, at moderate levels. The mortality is across a very large area, essentially where grand fir is present in Central Oregon and all the way to the California border. The Forest is assessing the existing condition and working with Regional Staff to consider options for addressing this issue.

Stay up-to-date with forest information by visiting: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/ochoco> or follow us on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/OchocoNatForestCrookedRiverNatGrassland>

To have your email added to the Forest's project mailing list, please visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/ochoco/landmanagement/projects> and enter your email in the "Email Updates" box. You will then begin to receive notification of project announcements such as public comment periods. This link also provides information for all current planning projects.

