

October 27, 2024

To: Tim Deboodt, subcommittee (SC) for Big Summit Prairie

Draft Report to CCNRAC

On 10/16, the CCNRAC members Kim, Melinda, Calista, Cliff, Mike, Tim, and Forest Service Representative Kevin Keown (FS) met in the Extension Office to discuss the ongoing possibilities for future management of the Big Summit Prairie. The owner, Waibel Properties LLC has offered the approximately 9020 acres for sale for \$20,000,000. Recently, a consortium of potential buyers has begun to explore the possibility of purchasing the property (bridge funders) and re-selling it to the Federal Government for management by the Ochoco NF.

The CCNRAC SC was tasked with exploring different aspects of the proposal and documenting those for the full committee to determine what if any further steps need to be taken at this time. Each member of the SC had listened to discussions in the previous two Committee meetings (Sept and Oct), and also brought their own thoughts and knowledge to the meeting. The initial step was for each person to describe their initial perceptions. Those include the following:

- Big Summit Prairie (BSP) is an iconic and unique feature of the Ochoco Mountains, homesteaded early in the settlement period and the Post Office of the Meadow was located on the Prairie, established on December 21, 1910 and renamed Ochoco in 1919.
- The majority of BSP is owned and managed by 2, separate private ownerships.
- The portion of BSP that is under consideration at this time is approximately 9020 deeded acres which are excluded from the Ochoco NF by the Declaration establishing the NF in 1911. It is surrounded by NF and Public Lands (BLM) on all sides.
- The lands have been grazed for nearly 150 years. The subcommittee strongly supported properly managed livestock grazing into the future.
- Consistent support was shown for future management to include maintaining an intact ownership, not subject to being sold off in parcels. It was noted that the BSP is not zoned at Exclusive Farm Use -1 (EFU-1) that would limit parcels to 320 acres or larger, but rather Forest, within which parcels would be limited to 320 acres, and with some finagling, down to 220 acres so long as at least 100 acres are owned elsewhere in the County, or even 80 acres with no ability to build permanent homes. This type of breakup would devastate the values for fish and wildlife habitat, grazing, scenic beauty and other features of the beloved area.
- Riparian meadows and streams are an important features of the BSP as water flows and seeps into it from all sides, to be slowly released downstream into the North Fork Crooked River. Some of the oldest existing water rights in Crook County are tied to BSP.
- Both above and below the BSP the North Fork Crooked River is classified as National Wild and Scenic River (1988). Assuming a change in ownership and management to public ownership and management, there would be strong interest in completing the inclusion of the entire length of the North Fork in the National W&S River System.

**FS Discussion** – Kevin provided information and answered questions about the potential project to enable the subcommittee to better understand what is going on. He was also able to explain

the types of information that the FS can and cannot share at this point in time. What process steps would be necessary for the Forest Service to gain management authority for those lands?

A complicating factor for the FS to gain management of the BSP is that the FS has a legislated overall limit on NF's of acquiring more than 3000 acres of private lands for addition to the Forest. The Ochoco has acquired about 27 acres over time against that limit. Also, this property lies outside of the Congressionally designated boundary of the Ochoco National Forest. Congress would have to adjust the boundary to allow for this acquisition. While to the knowledge of the SC, BLM has not been involved in exploring future management of BSP, that agency has no such limit to the best of our knowledge, and forms much of the boundary around BSP. Mike gave an example of the Missoula Field Office of BLM has acquired approximately 40,000 acres of previously large timber corporation land holdings, working with a bridge group, the Blackfoot Challenge and numerous other organizations. The third hurdle identified is the 'split estate' (separation of the surface and mineral rights) of the property.

**Discussion of public/vs private vs hybrid ownership of prairie** – This is a big issue: we need to discuss the varying views within community.

**Develop bulleted list of next steps** – We will brainstorm what our subcommittee needs to include in continuing work. A list and brief explanation will be developed of each.

- **Split surface and subsurface estate** – Some of the deeded lands only have surface management, and the subsurface mineral rights are owned by a different party. While it is unknown what mineral values might exist, it is a question that needs to be addressed.
- **Continued Grazing as a management strategy** - Grazing has been and properly managed grazing should remain an integral part of managing BSP going forward. It also is a use broadly supported by Crook County.
- **Tribal Rights – Hunting and traditional uses** – It is possible (likely?) that if the property becomes federally owned, it will increase access and affect the rights of the Warm Springs Tribal people for those lands.
- **Forest Legacy Funds** – alternate ways/sources of funding. Funding sources are competitive in their awarding.
- **Respect private landowner rights to buy/sell property** – This property is a major part of the customs, culture and economy of Crook County; private landowners should be able to purchase or divest of land without government intervention.
- **Public Options – FS, BLM, Private/Public** – A variety of different approaches for future management were discussed, that incorporated education, research, and other opportunities.
- **Public land ownership will have barriers to management from appeals, litigation** – How could that vulnerability be reduced? Legal barriers to planning and implementation of both Forest Service and BLM have greatly extended the time and cost of management along with the ability to practice needed activities. Planning results and decision making is often limited and reduced in accomplishment by a fear of litigation, costs and time.

- **Water Rights** – some of oldest water rights on North Fork Crooked River are attached to BSP, with the earliest dating back to the 1890's, the most recent ones in the early 1990's. This is a critical element for the future of Crook County.
- **How does BSP fit into larger landscape?**
- **How does BSP influence our customs, culture and economy?** What is history and story?
- **Experimental Stations and Research should be considered in this unique Ochoco landscape.** Three such stations exist in Oregon under the leadership of OSU Agricultural Research and Experiment Stations and USDA Agricultural Research Service – Northern Great Basin Range Experiment Station, Starkey Experiment Station and Katherine Creek out of LaGrande. Is there a role these units might assist in management?
- **What are interests of the current landowner** - Explore the opportunity to visit with the landowner, Waibel, as to their interests in how BSP should be managed going forward. Are there elements that might honor the history of the land and Schwab family going forward?

Please note that the SC considerations in this letter are for the purpose of education and for the CCNRAC moving forward to determine what, if any, role the full committee might want to pursue in the continued future exploration of possible future management scenarios. But there will be a lot of work that will not be public in the broad sense, and it seems most appropriate at this time to listen, and seek opportunities for this project to be handled to best meet the needs education and community dialogue similar to what we have done in several other issues within Crook County in recent years.

Mike