

Steens Mountain Advisory Council February 23, 2023, Meeting Summary Minutes – FINAL

Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC) met February 23, 2023, at the Bureau of Land Management's Burns District Office and via Zoom from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. PST. In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public. This document summarizes attendance, discussions that occurred, and decisions made. For the record, it is noted that to avoid any conflict of interest, Council members absent themselves from the meeting when the Council discusses matters in which a conflict of interest may occur.

SMAC members in attendance

- Leon Pielstick, Wild Horse and Burro Management Representative
- Terry Turner, Fish and Recreational Fishing Representative (Zoom)
- Kali Wilson, Grazing Permittee 1 Representative (Zoom)
- Jake Jakubik, No Financial Interest Representative
- Pete Runnels, Commercial Recreation Permit Holder Representative
- John F. Helmer, Dispersed Recreation Representative (Zoom)
- Karen Withrow, State Environment Representative
- Teresa Wicks, Local Environment Representative (Zoom)
- Butch Goette, Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation Representative
- Mike Fox, Private Landowner Representative

Vacant SMAC positions

- State Liaison Representative
- Grazing Permittee 2 Representative
- Burns Paiute Tribe Representative

Members of the public

- Bill Marlett, Advisor to Oregon Natural Desert Association
- Becky Wolf, Backcountry Horsemen
- Steve and Marilyn (last name not given), private citizens
- Bert Morris, private citizen
- Cliff Volpe, private citizen, SMAC Dispersed Recreation representative applicant
- John O'Connor, Backcountry Horsemen
- Eric Hawley, Burns Paiute Tribe, SMAC applicant

BLM

- Tara Thissell, BLM, Public Affairs Specialist
- Jeff Rose, BLM, Burns District Manager and Designated Federal Official
- Don Rotell, BLM, Andrews/Steens Resource Area Field Manager
- Autumn Toelle-Jackson, BLM, Assistant Field Manager for Andrews/Steens Field Office (Range)
- Kyle Wanner, BLM, [Acting] Assistant Field Manager for Andrews/Steens Field Office (Recreation/Realty)
- David Holst, BLM, Archaeologist

The meeting started at 8 a.m. with new member orientation. Tara Thissell reviewed

administrative processes for the SMAC, meeting protocols, council history, expectations, etc. and answered questions from incoming members. At 10 a.m., the entire council came together for required ethics training, led by Department of the Interior's Joseph Kaczmarek.

At 10:30 a.m., Thissell opened the meeting to the public and began with agenda review, facility logistics, and introductions from those in attendance. Each member gave a small bit of information about their background. This was the first meeting of the SMAC with a quorum in several years. There are still three vacant positions (Burns Paiute Tribe, State Liaison, and Grazing Permittee 2) and two positions with terms expiring in 2023 (May – Wild Horse and Burro; November – Dispersed Recreation). Nominations for all positions except for Grazing Permittee 2 (did not receive an application within the most recent nomination period) are waiting for vetting and approval/appointment through the White House and BLM's Headquarters.

Fire Year 2022 Review

BLM Fire Planners Joe Sullivan (Program Lead) and Justin DeCroo shared a slideshow and discussed wildfire and fuels activity in 2022 and plans for 2023. That presentation is attached to these minutes.

- The Griffin Fire was the largest wildfire on the district in 2022 and it only reached 1700 acres. 647 acres were on BLM-administered public land; the rest on private land. Previous juniper treatments in the area helped keep this fire much smaller than it could've been.
- Aerial weed treatment acres were down in 2022 due to a protest/appeal within the work contract. Planned acres that were not treated will be moved to 2023.
- Mike Fox asked about rejuvenation of junipers and why 'cut and pile' versus broadcast burn (since broadcast seems more effective). Most of the limitations are due to Sage grouse habitat and timelines for expensing contract dollars.
- Jake Jakubik asked why we need to treat juniper at all. Sullivan and Jeff Rose went into some of the history on juniper encroachment, catastrophic wildfire, the historic wildfire regime, changes in grazing practices, and climate change.
- Funding is available and we have great projects (new and maintenance) for fuels treatments on the table, but the capacity of contractors and staff could be an issue in the future.
- We continue to work hard with our partners and private landowners across jurisdictional boundaries to be most effective and successful.
- John Helmer mentioned how much he appreciated the great juniper work done at Riddle Brothers Ranch in 2022.
- Kali Wilson asked for a map showing treated areas (past/future), and Jake asked for a handout for hosts at Riddle Brothers to be able to explain the fuels work. The BLM will work on these items.

Recreation Program 2022 Review

BLM [Acting] Andrews/Steens Assistant Field Manager (Recreation/Realty) Kyle Wanner shared a slideshow and discussed visitor use, trends, statistics, special recreation permits, and recreation project updates for the district for 2022 and plans for 2023. That presentation is attached to these minutes.

- We use magnetic counters for vehicles on the roadways and infrared counters on trails to help us measure visitor use on Steens Mountain.
- We had a decrease in visitor use this year compared to last year – could be due to fuel prices. There was a spike in use in 2020 with the height of Covid restrictions, then a decline in 2021 and a further decline in 2022.
- Outside of SMAC purview – the Alvord Desert seems to be getting more and more popular.
- Page Springs Campground remains the largest revenue generator on the District.
- Leon Pielstick asked about the size of the group that necessitates a special recreation permit. In wilderness, the group size is 12, but in general, organized group size is sort of discretionary and relates directly to resource impacts.
- Reviewed the proposed overnight camping fee increase for the district. The rate will go up to \$16/night beginning April 1. Tara Thissell will provide the link to the Business Plan online that shows the analysis for this decision.
 - Teresa Wicks asked if there is any thought about the impact the increased rate could have on dispersed camping. Kyle emphasized that we still have several dispersed camping areas that are free and that might help people not feel “priced out” or that we are trying to alter use patterns.
- Dean Runyon and Associates has some great information on travel spending by county in Oregon; these dollars directly correlate to public lands and how tourism can positively impact small, rural communities.
- Mike Fox told the group that the Frenchglen Hotel does not have a concessionaire for the 2023 season (and beyond) and that could impact recreation use in southern Harney County.
- Projects: replaced some signage; upgraded seals in campground well houses; provided electronic payment means at South Steens (Remote Automated Kiosk) and Page Springs (Scan and Pay); completed trail maintenance with Northwest Youth Corps and stewardship work with Oregon Natural Desert Association.
- Trailkeepers of Oregon came out and gave a great workshop for BLM and community partners about the importance of trails and trail maintenance.
- Introduced Dean Reese, new BLM Outdoor Recreation Planner Wilderness.
- John Helmer gave kudos to Kyle Wanner for his great work all around and asked for a status update on the North Steens Equestrian campground (proposed) and the Penland campground (proposed). He also asked about improving trails and signage in the Mud and Ankle Creek trail areas – it’s hard in some areas to know where you are/ where to go.
 - We’ve had a significant amount of trouble getting water to the North Steens site and may need to reevaluate whether this remains a priority for the SMAC.
 - Wendy Rickman, BLM Recreation Planner, did a lot of leg work on estimates and pre-planning for the Penland site over the last few months.
 - John said he could work closer with the equestrian community to see about their specific priorities, though it was already recommended by the SMAC to go ahead and start small with Penland and grow the site as needed and able.
 - Fred Riddle trail (in Wilderness) is on the table for light maintenance this year.
 - Leon Pielstick reminded the group that the SMAC has previously been against

a lot of signs in the field and leaving more areas as “lands of discovery,” but that something might be necessary in key locations, especially in wide open spaces like Mud/Ankle Creek.

- Leon supports development at Penland over North Steens and was surprised nothing has been done there yet since the SMAC has talked about it so many times.
- Karen Withrow added her support for Penland since she receives many inquiries (while hosting at Riddle Ranch) about camping opportunities on the east side of the Steens.
- Most of the location or directional signs on the Steens are small, natural, and on routed wood. These are made locally and blend nicely with the environment.
- Jake Jakubik thanked Kyle for visiting Riddle Brothers Ranch while Jake was hosting there and encouraged as many field-going opportunities as possible for the agency staff.
- Teresa Wicks asked about Wildhorse Lake and noticed there are more people talking about and encouraging visitation there. Is there any way to better count/monitor impacts to that area with more people?
 - Kyle said we've been trying to get more information to people at the trailhead about responsible recreation, no campfires in the basin, etc. We are trying to monitor the area more closely and might work with ONDA and their stewards on a crowd-sourced monitoring option.

Designated Federal Official / Manager's Report

Jeff Rose, BLM Burns District Manager and SMAC Designated Federal Official, shared a few general updates:

- To support the Townsend's Big-eared bat species that occupies the Pike Creek mine on the east side of Steens Mountain, BLM and partner Bat Conservation International (BCI) in January repaired the adit's bat gate. A bat gate allows flyers into the adit while keeping humans out for their wellbeing and for bat health. Jeff shared some photos and LiDAR images of the mine system and talked about the work accomplished. BCI contracted with Hurricane Industries to install a more substantial bat gate – one with thick, square, narrowly spaced bars welded together in a grid.
- In July 2022, we received an inquiry about the “Reedy Lagoon” lithium mining claims on the east side of Steens Mountain/Alvord Desert area. The BLM responded with:
 - This area of interest for lithium extraction has been legislatively withdrawn from mineral exploration under the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Act of 2000. Per Section 401 of the Steens Cooperative Management and Protection Act (2000), "Subject to valid and existing rights, the Federal lands and interests in the land included within the withdrawal boundary ... are hereby withdrawn from location, entry and patent under the mining laws ... " (16 USC 460nnn-81). As such, the Bureau of Land Management will not approve any exploration or assessment activities for the lithium projects in the areas around Borax Lake and Hot Springs described online. Reedy Lagoon Corporation (project proponent) has 90 days from the date of marking-out the claims to file them with the BLM. To date, they have not contacted the BLM regarding this project. The BLM has recently, however,

notified the company that staked the claims that the area is withdrawn from mineral exploration.

- The BLM received notice just recently that the claim stakes have been removed.
- There are approximately 200 position vacancies BLM statewide; 27-29 in the Burns District. Ten of those are currently in the middle of hiring. High vacancies are likely due to several things – retirement bubble, administrative processes, less people in natural resource fields, people reevaluating how and where they want to work, local housing availability, etc.

Don Rotell, BLM Andrews/Steens Field Office Manager, added:

- Recently met with ONDA to “wrap up” the settlement agreement on the Burnt Car Road litigation. The only thing remaining in the agreement is to do a Lands with Wilderness Characteristics inventory in the South Blitzen Unit.
- Mike Fox asked if something like the Wilderness Characteristics evaluations could be something the SMAC or other collaborative works on since there are many challenges with fire in Wilderness/Wilderness Study Area.
- There is now a motorized closure on Pike Creek trail from East Steens Road approximately 1 mile to the creek crossing. We had previously investigated developing a parking area near the end of that one mile (which is an easement across private property) because there is currently nowhere to park or turn around. This development proved disadvantageous due to expense, logistics, and restrictions regarding a stream crossing. The temporary closure prohibits motorized travel on the easement, but people can still walk, ride, hike, etc. into the area.
- Page Springs Weir remains an issue. Dealing with the weir will likely require an Environmental Assessment. River Design Group out of Montana is helping with some proposals.
- Travel Management Planning – currently starting the on-the-ground phase of the inventory; a change in the subcontractor set us back a little bit, but we are on track again.
 - There’s been quite a history on travel management planning in the Steens Mountain area. Efforts have been litigated and ultimately remanded (full or in part) back to the agency due to insufficient baseline data.
 - The next effort will be the most intense and encompassing route inventory we’ve ever done. It will include everything on the landscape. There will absolutely be a significant amount of public input in the process.
- Teresa Wicks mentioned that it seemed like people are driving on closed roads more often than in the past. How will the road inventory and planning relate to some of the places where misuse is happening?
 - Unauthorized motor use is a different problem than travel management planning (which is about route inventory, what exists and how it is/will be use, etc.).
- Mike Fox wanted to make sure fire management is kept on the forefront as the agency wrestles with Travel Management.

Bridge Creek Area Allotment Management Plan / Environmental Impact Statement Update

Autumn Toelle-Jackson (BLM Assistant Field Manager - Range) and Don Rotell shared information about the Bridge Creek Allotment Management Plan Environmental Impact Statement. A basic outline of the range of alternatives was discussed, along with other stats and details about the allotments within the plan. A copy of the presentation is attached to these minutes. Discussion throughout:

The BLM will use a large amount of the analyses done in the previous planning effort for Bridge Creek in the new EIS. The EIS process is very complex and lengthy but the advantage is not signing a “finding of no significant impact” – the EIS Record of Decision allows for the review and approval of such.

There were about 110 different “points” made in the initial scoping opportunity on the EIS. We are currently working through these finds and determining what will/can be addressed in the analyses. There are currently five alternatives in development for Bridge Creek (see presentation slides). The applicants for grazing preference in this area were cooperatively involved in the development of alternatives with their needs addressed somewhere in the spread of alternatives.

Our goal with any grazing management plan is to adjust the season of use to work cooperatively with livestock operators, protect riparian values, protect other resource values, and focus overall on the long-term goal of multiple-use and sustainability. We *can* promote ecological health while accommodating livestock use and using livestock to meet some of our other concerns like fine fuel accumulations. Grazing rotations are specified in the EIS, i.e., periods and seasons of use and non-use for pastures within allotments. Permits are allocated for 10-year periods. At the end of that period, there is a process to review if the permit should be renewed, if changes to the Allotment Management Plan should be made, etc. Anyone has a legal right to challenge grazing decisions made by the agency.

John Helmer stated that he agreed with the very-public process through EIS planning and that it should help garner a solid Decision at its conclusion. How should SMAC be involved in the effort? The BLM would welcome a recommendation from the SMAC on the alternative they support (or parts of certain alternatives, etc.). This recommendation will help the agency move forward with a collective and cooperative decision with significant input from various stakeholders.

Autumn reiterated that the EIS will be largely based off information in the Environmental Assessment that was completed for the Bridge Creek area. That EA is fully available online for everyone to see, read, study, inquire about, etc. The group agreed they would like this topic to be on each meeting agenda, and that as the document develops, a smaller SMAC subcommittee may be in order.

Public Comment

John O’Connor, Backcountry Horsemen

- The SMAC doesn’t have any business being in the middle of the Bridge Creek planning process. It’s a political issue, not scientific.
- The Backcountry Horsemen would like to see the Cold Springs Road closed to motorized use. The Cold Springs cabin is popular, but the road is terrible and even

with signs signifying “wilderness,” there are lots of wilderness intrusions with UTVs and there is no enforcement.

- Volunteers and the work done by Backcountry Horsemen is too often overlooked and underappreciated.
- There are not enough campground hosts and no enforcement of amenity payments.
- Trails need more signage.
- Wildhorse Lake trail goes on into the Berrington Trail, which takes you into the proposed Penland camping area. The Penland area needs to be developed.
- The Backcountry Horsemen do not support the development of the North Steens Equestrian Campground as it is currently proposed. We would support some kind of development off the back side of the existing Fish Lake Campground.
- There is a camera pointing at the gate area that goes into Riddle Brothers Ranch. The BLM does not have any knowledge of this camera but will look into it.
- Was not contacted directly by the Corral Facility about adopting a specific horse from the South Steens Herd Management Area gather.

John Helmer gave extra kudos to Backcountry Horsemen for all the volunteer work they do. They are reliable and consistent and do exceptional work.

Cliff Volpe, SMAC applicant for Dispersed Recreation, introduced himself and said he has been coming to the Steens for decades. He has gotten to know many people in Harney County and thanked the members of the SMAC for the work they do. Cliff said the Steens is a very special place and thanked the BLM for the work they do in managing the area.

Bill Marlett, Oregon Natural Desert Association, gave kudos to the SMAC and BLM for the work they are doing and appreciates all the good efforts.

Leon Pielstick mentioned that he supported the Penland camp development and that the discussion has been before the SMAC several times, and that he is surprised nothing has been done out there yet.

Mike Fox does not agree with closing the Cold Springs Road.

SMAC Member Round-robin

Each meeting, council members are provided time on the agenda to share information from their constituents. This could be questions or concerns, upcoming events, changes in prominent roles, projects, or other proposals, etc.

Pete Runnels (Commercial Recreation) – Steens Mountain Running Camp is full for 2023 – their 48th year! The Camp is not-yet-considering a third session, but it remains an option in the future. Also, there is a new video out promoting Harney County (Land Sky Water Soul) – check it out: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rUAGuN9k0g

Leon Pielstick (Wild Horse Management) – South Steens HMA gather occurred in September 2022 (753 horses). He is also pleased with the motorized closure at Pike Creek and the decision to not move forward with a creek crossing, parking area, etc.

Butch Goette (Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation) – appreciates everyone’s patience as he gets up to speed on SMAC and BLM work. He is very much looking forward to the next three years of his service term.

Mike Fox (Private Landowner) – glad to be here!

Karen Withrow (Local Environmental) – very much appreciates the training and looks forward to working with the group in the future.

John Helmer (Dispersed Recreation) – spends a month at Riddle Brothers Ranch every year and from his visitor contacts there he gets an overriding sense that the Steens is valued as a wild place, relatively ‘difficult’ to see, not like a National Park or over interpreted/over paved place. There is a worry about increased use, particularly with human waste issues and dispersed camping in new areas. Strategic Planning for the SMAC is important, and we should take that on, so the SMAC isn’t always in a reactive mode – we have to figure out what is important to us as public representatives and be in charge of our own destiny! John is thrilled to see new faces on the council and to finally have a quorum on the SMAC – thanks to everyone for applying and serving and to the BLM for seeing us through these processes.

Teresa Wicks (Statewide Environmental) – from a conservation perspective, there is increasing concern from visitors about the impact of increased used in the area. Teresa is happy to be serving in the SMAC in an official capacity!

Kali Wilson (Grazing Permittee) – really happy to see new people and a quorum on the SMAC and is looking forward to meeting everyone in person. Shared some concern about the amount of gravel vs. pavement on the East Steens Road – the concerns are on both sides of the spectrum...some people support more pavement and others do not. Jeff Rose said that 8 to 10 miles additional of the East Steens Road will be paved in the next couple of years, so the concerns are bound to stay present.

Terry Turner (Fish and Recreational Fishing) – Regarding Page Springs Weir, does the BLM have a report on the ED&A study on the presence and absence of carp above and below the weir? Jeff will see what he can find and send it to Terry. Terry is happy to see River Designs working on the weir project.

Follow up items:

There were a few follow-ups from the session - mostly for Tara:

- Provide [South Steens Wild Horse gather](#) numbers and wild horse and burro [population census data](#). ✓
- Update Mike Fox's address on SMAC Contact list. ✓
- Send all meeting materials to the group. Next time I'll do this BEFORE the session. Where is my brain? The Recreation update and meeting agenda are already on the SMAC Google Drive so they are not attached here. http://bit.ly/SMAC_docs Otherwise, see attached! ✓
- Provide history on Steens Mountain Travel Management planning----- coming soon.

- Provide link to [Bridge Creek Environmental Assessment](#). ✓ SMAC to read up in preparation for Bridge Creek EIS discussions!
- Look into the mention of a reported camera looking at the Riddle Ranch access gate area (a concern mentioned during public comment period).
- Provide link to the [Burns District Recreation Business Plan](#) (this is the analysis/documentation for the increased amenity fees). ✓
- (JOE/JUSTIN) Put together written handout regarding fuels work on the Steens/Riddle Ranch area for Riddle Ranch hosts.
- (JOE/JUSTIN) Map of fuels projects in the Steens area. What has been done, when, what is planned, etc.
- (JEFF) Provide Terry Turner with the testing information regarding carp presence (or lack of) in Donner und Blitzen River above and below Page Springs Weir.
- (MIKE & BUTCH) Fill out and return to Tara the VENDOR MASTER REQUEST worksheet (attached if you lost your hard copy). Call with any questions.
- (JAKE JAKUBIK) Find and share information about military flyovers in the Steens area.

Minutes approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. J. K.', written over a large, stylized checkmark.