

## **Steens Mountain Advisory Council**

**June 15-16, 2023, Meeting Summary Minutes – FINAL**

Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC) met June 15, 2023, for a field tour on Steens Mountain (10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. PST), and June 16 at the Frenchglen School in Frenchglen, Oregon and via Zoom (8:30 a.m. to 1 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

- Terry Turner, Fish and Recreational Fishing Representative
- Jake Jakubik, No Financial Interest Representative
- Pete Runnels, Commercial Recreation Permit Holder Representative
- John F. Helmer, Dispersed Recreation Representative
- Karen Withrow, State Environment Representative
- Teresa Wicks, Local Environment Representative
- Butch Goette, Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation Representative
- Mike Fox, Private Landowner Representative

### Vacant SMAC positions

- State Liaison Representative
- Grazing Permittees 1 and 2 Representatives
- Burns Paiute Tribe Representative
- Wild Horse and Burro Management Representative

### Members of the public

- Kali Wilson, SMAC Grazing Permittee 1 Representative (incumbent; reappointment pending)
- Linda Wallace (June 15)
- Jane Marsh (June 15)
- Steve Hammond (June 16)
- Emery Hammond (June 16)
- Gary Miller (June 16)
- Corbin Hammond (June 16)
- Rod Hoagland (June 16)
- David Bilyeu (June 16)
- Patty Dorroh, Harney County Commissioner (June 16)

- Bill Marlett, Advisor to Oregon Natural Desert Association (June 16)
- TJ Barbour (June 16)

#### 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
- Kyle Wanner, BLM, [Acting] Assistant Field Manager for Andrews/Steens Field Office (Recreation/Realty)
- Dean Reese, BLM, Outdoor Recreation Planner (Wilderness)
- Alec Barber, BLM, Riparian/Aquatics Specialist

#### **FIELD TOUR, JUNE 15, 2023**

On June 15, the SMAC and attending public toured various parts of Steens Mountain and the surrounding vicinity, including:

- Page Springs Campground – discussed increased overnight camping fees, electronic pay options, and the Page Springs Weir.
- Burnt Car Road – discussed 2009 Oregon Natural Desert Association litigation and settlement agreement, travel management, wilderness character determination update for the Burnt Car Road(s) area, and South Steens wild horse management.
- Proposed Penland Campground area – discussed the campground proposal and heard from SMAC about their preference for both family and equestrian camps, and for BLM to make this project a priority; access and Pike Creek were also mentioned. The group emphasized and agreed that communication with nearby landowners early and often regarding the Penland Campground is an absolute must.

#### **BUSINESS SESSION, JUNE 16, 2023**

Recap of field trip:

- Terry Turner felt the fish weir discussion was great and was pleased to see design and testing work on the sediment. We are on a great path forward and Terry will report this information to ODFW's Fish Passage Task Force when he is meeting next week.
- Butch Goette was horrified with the number of wild horses on the range – it is a huge problem. It was very interesting to hear about the patchwork of interests in the landscape. All the various interest groups, individual opinions, etc. are very complicated to mesh.
- Jake Jakubik added that the overpopulation of wild horses is a large problem. There could also be an issue with increased visitation on the Alvord Desert.

- Karen was very appreciative about going to the field, and hearing information while seeing it in person was hugely valuable.
- Kali Wilson reflected on what the SMAC has accomplished in the past several years and wanted to remind the group of their contributions to success.
- Mike Fox was encouraged about the Page Springs fish weir regarding potential migration of carp. He was relieved to hear that migration would not be an issue with removal of the weir. Mike would like the BLM to work on better access to see the east side of the Steens – when we lose access to places (like the secondary road off Burnt Car, or Pike Creek), it's a concern. Access is a very important thing, and we really need to consider it. On the wild horse issue, we have to do whatever we can to get horse numbers down to the realm of reasonableness – we may even need to advocate for changes in the laws for wild horse management. Mike is encouraged by the opportunity for camping developments at Penland.
- Pete Runnels also supports the development at Penland.
- Teresa Wicks appreciated the opportunity to hear more about how the agency is meeting the increased pressure on Steens and trying to get ahead of it at the same time. Teresa also valued learning about population control measures for wild horses.

**Designated Federal Official update (Jeff Rose, BLM Burns District Manager):**

- Remember about wild horses.... Perspective is huge. What looks like an issue to us, may look like a success to someone else. Population control will continue to be a challenge. We are successful in the areas we are in part because of the work with our grazing permittee partners.
- Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding – Southern Burns District, along with Lakeview and a tiny bit of Vale, are identified as a “Restoration Landscape”. IRA funding will be focused on project implementation with about \$5 million. We are currently working on what we can do with that money and have to spend about half of it by the end of 2024. Some general ideas include seeding, noxious weed spraying, juniper treatments, recreation projects, and road work.
- Proposed Public Land Rule –
  - o Mike asked if this was the proposal to add “conservation” to the BLM’s charge. Jeff answered ‘yes,’ and that the opportunity for public comment was open online until June 20, but was recently extended for 15 days. So far, the rule has received over 70,000 comments. John Helmer added that he would like this item to be on future agendas so the SMAC can be kept up to date – also, how does this correlate with the Steens already being designated as “National Conservation Lands”.

- The BLM provided specific comments on pieces of the Rule, like how to apply the proposed conservation easements, land health standard requirements for different activities, details of how new Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are etc.
- Jeff thanked Kyle Wanner for all his great work in the recreation program, serving as an Outdoor Recreation Planner and the entire program lead/supervisor.

### **Andrews/Steens Field Manager's Update (Don Rotell, BLM):**

- Decision in place for the Alvord Allotment Management Plan. The Decision was appealed; stay request denied by OHA, and subsequently appealed to IBLA.
- Mann Lake/Carlson Creek Grazing Permit Renewals were appealed; stay request denied.
- Bridge Creek Environmental Impact Statement – looking for draft EIS to be released toward the end of the summer/early fall.
- Staffing updates (new):
  - Planning and Environmental Coordinator – Autumn Toelle-Jackson
  - Acting Assistant Field Manager (Recreation/Realty) – Kyle Wanner
  - Recreation Maintenance Worker – Ronald Darniell
  - Assistant Field Manager (Range) – Andrew Daniels (not yet in Burns, but soon)
- We continue to monitor use on the Alvord Desert and try to mitigate concerns. We installed a second vault restroom at Frog Springs and the 30-yard dumpster is on site!
- Steens Mountain Loop Road opening schedule seems to be close to “on schedule” for this year, despite the heavy snowpack this winter.
- Nature's Advocate Inholder Access – we continue waiting for LiDAR surveys from the NRCS (National Resource Conservation Service) and expect it within the next few weeks.
  - John Helmer added that SMAC has put a lot of work into this project and reminded the group that the landowner made a request for access into their inholding in 2013 – that's been an entire decade.
  - Jeff Rose stated that the easy answer is to just say no, but we are trying hard to be creative and find ways to make this happen with and for the landowner.

### **Recreation (Kyle Wanner, BLM):**

- Kyle shared a handout and went through each page of information (attached to these notes).

- Some flooding/high water on the mountain – at Riddle Brothers Ranch, Page Springs this spring, etc. The operations crew has been busy finding and fixing damages. Hiking trails with stream crossings have been impassable.
- Chickahominy (full, stocked and holding water) and Mann Lake (holding water) have both been dry but have water this year.
- Steens Mountain Loop Road open to South Steens May 18, to big Indian Gorge June 14, and to Jackman Park Campground on June 16. We are still hoping to have the full loop accessible by July 4!
- Reminder that Steens Mountain Loop Road now on tripcheck.com!
- Travel management planning – third party contractor is continuing route inventory this summer and fall; then analyses phase; then scoping, developing a plan, etc. We have a fair amount of federal highways funding to help support this effort. Progress in motion!
- Have completed fence work in South Steens /Eusabio Ridge area in the No Livestock Grazing Area.
- We have 6 weeks of youth and young adult trail maintenance crews on District. They've already worked at Moon Reservoir, Chickahominy and the Levi Brinkley Trail at Riddle Brothers Ranch. Next up: trails at Page Springs Campground.
- Supported area-wide fish stocking in the Burns District in May.
- Updated campground fees went into effect April 1 – overnight amenity fees are now \$16 per night (\$5 per night for additional vehicles). Electronic pay stations are available at Page Springs Campground.
- Campground and portal signs, trail signs, trail directional markers, and trailhead registers are planned for upgrades/updates.
- Special Recreation Permits are back to pre-pandemic levels (20 issued so far this year).
- We've had pack-rafters and kayakers put in a Riddle Brothers Ranch and/or Donner und Blitzen River Crossing and float the river down to Page Springs Campground. This is NOT for beginners. We are monitoring use.
- Fred Riddle Trail will be maintained/reestablished (started) this year with support from youth crews and Oregon Natural Desert Association.
- ONDA will continue with their stewardship work on Alvord Desert, WSA and recreation monitoring, clean up, etc.
- Excited about Penland campground and adaptive management there!
  - **John Helmer made a motion on behalf of the members present: The members of SMAC here present endorse and encourage the development of a family and equestrian camp at Penland. This**

development is a high priority that should be funded and move forward quickly.

- Mike Fox second.
- All in favor, none opposed!
- John Helmer added kudos for Kyle Wanner – he does two jobs and is excellent at both. In the field, in the office, all around terrific! The rest of the SMAC agreed!

### **Bridge Creek Environmental Impact Statement:**

Don Rotell went through a handout about the application process for the “conditionally available forage in the Bridge Creek allotments”. That handout is attached to these notes.

The BLM’s goal is to reestablish grazing in the Bridge Creek allotments. What should/could SMAC’s role be on this effort? It is complex and controversial, but also very process-laden, which leaves it without much flexibility. Should the SMAC form a subcommittee/task force? One area where SMAC could provide input is the BLM’s decision to provide two separate decisions regarding this matter – one for the Allotment Management Plan (how grazing is used on the landscape) itself and the other for Forage Allocation (who becomes the permittee). Another could be the Allotment Management Plan alternatives.

The council asked “Why is there controversy over grazing in the Bridge Creek area to begin with? What happened in 2014? Why are we here / what is the history? Is there public information and background on this?” The best means for finding history on the Bridge Creek process is online, here: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/1504684/510>

### **Public comment period:**

- David Bilyeu – great meeting and happy to hear all the updates; interested in following the issue of SMAC maintaining a quorum.
- Patty Dorroh – appreciates the Zoom opportunity.
- TJ Barbour – would like to suggest having a camera at the meeting and better microphones.
- Gary Miller – wild horse overpopulation continues to be an issue; they are not native and this many horses destroys the ground. Why does it take the agency so many years to fix problems? Regarding fire, there is way too much fuel loading on the landscape. With all the science and intelligence available, why are we not making better decisions? Gary would like to see more collaboration – we all want the same thing, but we need to do better and be faster about getting there.

- Steve Hammond – Thanks to the SMAC for all the time they put into the work they do. The BLM has a broad latitude in getting results, and any controversy is in the precedence that has been set within that latitude. When the Steens Act was passed, one of the goals was to preserve the uniqueness to the area. If the BLM must follow all their policies and procedures, that uniqueness will be lost. Regarding Bridge Creek, these allotments were the “showcase” of the Steens Act legislation. These allotments are the viewshed of “the Steens”. We need to work more on common goals rather than the process.
  - Mike Fox agreed on the sentiment about common goals. That is something within our wheelhouse. Mike asked Steve “what should we be looking for in creating a showcase out of Bridge Creek again?”
    - Steve said “anything is possible, tell us what you want. Hammond Ranches is in the process of acquiring another allotment, but if I can’t use my private land in the way I need to, I’m going to move on to something else.”
    - There is history involved in decision making. As stewards of the range, consider that.
- John Helmer appreciated Gary Miller’s comment and the reminder of science on the landscape and frustration behind some decisions. John also appreciated Steve Hammond’s comments about the uniqueness of the Steens and the importance of collaboration, creativity, and common goals. John is always surprised at SMAC meetings that there is so little involvement/presence from the environmental community. Where is Oregon Natural Desert Association and why won’t they engage directly and through the Council? They need to be at the table.
  - Bill Marlett noted that he applied for the SMAC in the early 2000s and his application was rejected.
  - David Bilyeu added that many people have tried to bring ONDA in on the work being done, without much success. This truly is important. There have been personnel changes and maybe in the future there will be better opportunities.
- Butch Goette – about wild horses...there is a misconception with the public about horses, their impacts, their history, etc. Also, having 9 out of 12 positions for a quorum on the SMAC is very difficult to reach. We would need a legislative change to reduce the number and we should maybe look at that.
- Kali Wilson – wondered about the changes in process that have made the SMAC appointment process slower. Unfortunately, whatever has happened is beyond the district and OR/WA BLM State Office. Kali also asked about representation from the Burns Paiute Tribe, as they have been very uninvolved in the SMAC for many years.

- There is a tribal representative application currently in vetting.
- Mike Fox said he will contact two people with Burns Paiute Tribe to see about participation.
- Teresa Wicks asked if they could access the Bridge Creek area to see things on the ground. There is, but we should narrow down the specifics.

### **SMAC Strategic Planning (John Helmer):**

What should SMAC be working on? Why are we here?

Jeff Rose stated that whether the SMAC has a quorum or not, what they have to say is really important to the BLM. Jeff encouraged the SMAC to give themselves grace and look at acute and chronic issues both and evaluate what to tackle – sometimes looking at small wins is a good place to start. It is also important to realize that some things take an exceptional amount of time...agency processes can be very complex which extends timelines significantly.

Teresa reminded the group that paying attention to those processes is important because we don't want to set a precedent with anything happening in those processes. It might make more sense to focus on the details within the processes instead of the individual outcomes.

Between now and the next meeting, SMAC needs to look over the previous Strategic Plan and put together some thoughts about priorities, addressing what's in the original plan and what to update it with.

Anything the SMAC can do to have dinner together before or during meetings is essential! Plan for that!

### **Council Member Round Robin**

Mike Fox, Private Landowner representative – appreciated attendance from Rod Hoagland, Steven Hammond, Emery Hammond, Corbin Hammond and Gary Miller at the meeting. Mike is working on connecting with area landowners and how to best communicate with them with varying schedules and preferences.

Pete Runnels, Commercial Recreation representative – Steens Mountain Running Camp is full with 180 campers set for two week-long sessions at the end of July.

John Helmer, Dispersed Recreation representative – Steens Mountain Running Camp is truly inspirational! Camp Director Harland Yriarte says it is more about personal growth than it is running, and John completely agrees! This time of year, with the



mosquitos, visitor use tends to shift to the South Steens and Riddle Ranch area. Many people cross the bridge at the ranch to head up Little Blitzen Gorge. People love this area and don't want it over commercialized.

Butch Goette, Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation representative – hoping to talk to more constituents and find out their thoughts.

Karen Withrow, State Environmental representative – really appreciates environmental representatives back on the SMAC. She is hoping to increase that voice. At the same time, when we set priorities and deal with things, let's remember to try and do what's best for the land.

Terry Turner, Fish and Recreational Fishing representative– in Trout Unlimited news, the new eastside co-conservation chair is Rick Roy.

Kali Wilson, Grazing Permittee representative – Is there information regarding Sage grouse plan amendments/map updates? Jeff Rose stated that ODFW is redoing their Sage grouse maps in terms of habitat and that will key into the BLM's update of the Sage Grouse Resource Management Plan amendment(s). When we have more information, the BLM will share. Regarding Penland, and the fact that there will be a well on site, Kali wanted to make sure we address local/area landowners and water rights.

Teresa Wicks, Local Environmental representative – Regarding Oregon Outback's Dark Sky Sanctuary proposal that includes part of Harney County, is the BLM Burns District supportive of this? Don Rotell said that BLM is supportive of dark sky resources. The agency has been approached by a group that did some light pollution inventories in the area and is responding to their feedback, potentially looking into mitigating pollution where it makes sense, etc.

### **Administrative Business/Close-out**

- Approved February 2023 meeting minutes with a few minor changes.
- John Helmer nominated Mike Fox, who accepted, as SMAC chairperson.
- Mike Fox nominated Jake Jakubik as SMAC vice-chairperson. Karen Withrow is also up for consideration for this position. To be determined at the next meeting.

Tara closed out the meeting and noted suggested agenda items for the next session, proposed for October 19-20, 2023, in Burns, Oregon.

### **Future meeting agenda items:**

**Follow up items:**

(JEFF/DON) Bridge Creek – Can applicants that aren't "approved" appeal the reasons MID-PROCESS on why they weren't "approved"?

(TARA) Reading through dispersed camping information on the website – for the Steens and possibly for the Alvord, some better information available would be helpful. Provide suggested areas, what is expected, "leave no trace", etc.

(TARA) Provide a list of acronyms to the group.

(ALL) Between now and the next meeting, SMAC needs to look over the previous Strategic Plan and put together some thoughts about priorities, addressing what's in the original plan and what to update it with.

Meeting minutes approved by/on:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mike Fox', written over a faint, larger signature that is partially obscured.

Mike Fox, Chair  
September 28, 2023