

Notes
John Day-Snake Resource Advisory Council Meeting
Thursday-Friday, Oct. 19-20, 2023

Thursday, Oct. 19 -

Attendance:

RAC members Terry Drever Gee, Susie Koppert, Mary Fleischmann, Tom Mottl, Katy Nelson, Randy Jones, Steve Lent, Mia Sheppard, Shay White, Jim Reiss, Glenn Burleigh, Jerry Brummer and Greg Jackle.

Agency representatives: Shane DeForest, Vale BLM District Manager/Designated Federal Official; Amanda Roberts, Prineville BLM District Manager; Sarah Sherman, Vale BLM, Acting Baker Field Manager; Darren Goodding, Wallowa-Whitman NF (Zoom); Ann Merkle, Ochoco NF; Ann Niesen, Malheur National Forest Supervisor.

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator

Public: Dre Golden; Renee Patrick; J.P. Patterson, Warm Springs Tribe Natural Resources.

The meeting convened at 1 p.m. RAC Chairman Randy Jones took a moment to recognize the land within the RAC boundaries is the ancestral territory of the Tribes in the region and the RAC should honor their lives, legacy and descendants.

Designated Federal Official Report/Agency Updates (attached)

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (attached) – Darren Goodding said the Baker Watershed project is moving forward and he hopes to see a draft Environmental Assessment released in the coming months.

The Forest's FY23 timber target was 20 MMBF and they actually sold 33.7 MMBF.

The Double Creek Fire has created stewardship opportunities along Hat Point Road into the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. Under the Tribal Forest Protection Act, fuelwood is being provided to elders of the Nez Perce.

Have the science benefits of thinning been reported? Oregon State University, Malheur National Forest and the WWNF have developed plot data. Goodding can provide more detail if the RAC is interested.

The RAC reviewed the Blue Mountain Forest Plan before work was stopped. When is it coming back? It's in the assessment phase, but the formal process has not yet begun. A number of open houses are planned and the public will be asked to identify places important to them. NEPA work should begin in 2024.

How are timber targets set? The Region offsets timber targets and it's not unusual for them to change. Sometimes salvage sales increase output, like the Double Creek Fire, which resulted in sales for hazard tree removal along roads and fuel breaks.

Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River Grasslands (attached) – Acting Public Affairs Officer Ann Merkle said the forest is transitioning from temporary seasonal hiring to permanent seasonal hiring, offering six months on and six months off, with benefits. Positions include forest aide, forest tech, archaeologist, biologist and range, as well as others.

Planning is under way for the Mill Creek Dry Forest Restoration Project, which proposed to restore 40,000 acres of timber stands to original composition on the Lookout Mountain Ranger District.

As part of the 10-year Wildfire Crisis Strategy, funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) the Forest and Grasslands will be working to reduce fuel loads along with planting and seeding native grasses within the Central Oregon Investment Landscape. Ochoco NF specialists are undertaking planning for fuels reduction across the Grassland in response to the Wildfire Crisis Strategy.

Later this [fiscal] year, the Ochoco NF will be issuing a proposed action for the Lower Bridge Fuels Reduction and Habitat Resilience Project, located on the western side of the Grasslands. planting and seeding.

The Forest is beginning a one to three-year program under the American Indian Landscape Co-Management Cultural Exchange Program to collaborate with American Indian Tribal partners on projects and programs of mutual interest through a partnership agreement with the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers.

Question: The Equity Action Plan requires that First Foods be built into documents and policy statements. Will that be done? That's still being fleshed out. The Forest definitely encourages known First Foods education.

Suggestion: Perhaps interpretive education could be part of the Walton Lake Restoration Project. That's a great idea.

Is the Forest addressing the housing cost issue? It's been suggested to provide affordable housing for government employees, particularly in the form of bunkhouses.

When will the updated draft motor vehicle use map be uploaded? That hasn't been determined yet.

Vale BLM (attached) – Shane DeForest reported Baker Field Office has been working to resolve rights-of-way issues within the South Fork Walla Walla Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Sections of several ROWs were washed out during heavy flooding in 2020. The BLM is in the process of developing a new Environmental Assessment to determine how best to address this and other values, including fish habitat for endangered species.

Other district activities include a proposal to develop a weed wash station at Virtue Flat Off-Highway Vehicle Area; issues with dumping and trash on federal lands; and outreach/education.

The National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center will reopen May 24 after being closed for energy efficiency renovations.

Question: What about lithium exploration on the Vale District? The Malheur Field Office, which is served by the Southeast Oregon RAC, is reviewing several project proposals within the McDermitt Caldera. Concerns include cultural, wildlife, sage-grouse and water quality. The District has also received a proposal to create a McDermitt ACEC which is also being reviewed.

How would an ACEC work with lithium? The BLM has discretion -- an ACEC could be any size, anywhere within the caldera. What about water? These sites are in some of the driest areas on the District and the McDermitt Creek is downslope from them.

Is the Virtue Flat lek still viable? Yes. Are there any solar projects on the Vale District? No.

The Owyhee Pump Project proposal has come to life again. This would use solar and wind to pump water into an underground reservoir, which would then gravity feed turbines at night. Although located on BLM ground, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is the lead agency for the environmental review.

Will this affect boating? No. There are several similar projects being proposed around Oregon. The RAC may want to look into this topic at some point. How much energy would this generate? The proposal is for 600 megawatts. Is the project site near Adrian, Ore.? Loosely. Won't it impact the flow above and below the dam? That's the primary public interest -- about 3,000 acre feet of water would be impounded. The water isn't considered lost because it rotates. There are also concerns about impacts to irrigation in the area.

Prineville BLM (attached) -- Amanda Roberts reported the land acquisition at McDonald's Ferry funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund is complete. This 4,000 acre area includes the area where Oregon Trail pioneers crossed the John Day River.

The draft John Day River Boater Guide is being reviewed and a John Day River Needs Assessment and Commercial Allocation Study is under way.

The District has received six applications for solar development totaling 18,000 acres, although it is unlikely the full acreage would be used. These will be tiered off the national Programmatic Utility-Scale Solar Environmental Assessment.

A new AT&T communications tower has been authorized on Power Butte. The Deschutes Field Office has published seasonal wildlife closures in the Federal Register, making them legally enforceable.

Deschutes County has narrowed 30 proposed sites for a new landfill down to three, two of which are on BLM lands. One site is east of Hwy 97 between Bend and Redmond; a second is off Powell Butte Hwy in the eastern part of the county; and the third is on private land adjacent to the Oregon Badlands Wilderness. BLM is supportive of the proposal near Hwy 97 (also county preferred); however, the county needs to consider required FAA buffers for the Redmond

Airport. The site next to the Badlands would require a right-of-way across BLM, which would necessitate an environmental impact statement.

There were 60 wildfire starts this season, 44 of which were human-caused. There is a significant fire facility deficit, in part because it takes 12 years to complete the siting and construction process.

We're shifting from fire season to prescribed season very quickly. There is a national commitment to reduce fuels, especially in Grant County and Prineville.

Old Teeters Road is under new ownership with a locked gate forcing motorists to drive around or turn around, but it is still open due to a court order. Maintaining public access is a priority for the district. It's been difficult to communicate to the public and signage is confusing.

Will the solar projects affect sage-grouse? The first one is not in sage-grouse habitat, but it is in winter range.

Are firefighters unhappy with their pay? The temporary pay increase is expiring, and entry-level firefighters are making minimum wage. The BLM is continuing to pay the difference. If the increase isn't in the new federal budget, many firefighters will likely leave the agency.

Is a wild horse gather planned? The district is working through the environmental assessment for a very small gather on the Liggett Table Herd Management Area.

RAC member Katy Nelson commented the wild horse situation in Murderers Creek has been resolved peacefully thanks to shared values. Ranchers and environmentalists didn't want to see grazing in the HMA.

Comment: The 10-year stewardship on the Malheur National Forest is ending.

Comment: Invasive quagga mussels have been found in Idaho. Managers should be vigilant. A problem has been that boat check stations are not manned around the clock and wash stations are not provided for boaters. Treatments for mussels have killed a lot of fish. It's believed the mussels were brought in by kayak, based on the area where they were first found.

Prineville is looking at business plans for recreation fee sites to create more sustainable recreation. Any proposed changes would come before the RAC for review and recommendation. Some collection stations were removed due to theft. Remote operating kiosks to collect payment by card have been wildly successful and popular.

Will the District be grading the road in Ferry Canyon Valley? Until recently, the district has 600 miles of roads and only had one staff person to perform maintenance. Additional personnel have been hired and the plan is to grade roads twice a year.

How is Prineville addressing corner-hopping? Corner crossing has been determined to be legal, but the district is waiting on a court opinion.

RAC member Katy Nelson commented the wild horse situation in Murderers Creek has been resolved peacefully thanks to shared values. Ranchers and environmentalists didn't want to see grazing in the HMA.

The RAC never seems to address fire, it's the 800-pound gorilla. Tactics, management, large-scale fire. Fires are pushing north and there are huge fire scars. Now there are even some in the Arctic Circle. Perhaps the joint RAC meeting could encourage landscape-scale treatment. The RAC would be able to help with public education. Drought and bugs are killing huge stands of trees and are a fire risk.

What about the Prineville biomass project? It's still in the planning stages, but would generate 25-30 megawatts of power to supply the data centers.

The biochar plant in John Day is retooling to bond mercury. The agriculture and mining markets are looking at environmental restoration, re-establishing natives, planting in biochar and broadcasting biochar, because it holds water well. The challenge is transportation. Traditionally, biochar should not be more than 50 miles to market. Other products could increase its value. But biochar creates carbon. Agricultural research stations are looking at that. It's still toxic. There are a lot of issues.

RAC member Tom Mottl said on behalf of Friends of Deschutes Canyon he appreciates the BLM for their partnership and success.

The RAC gets a lot of information from the agencies, what can we do with it? Don't disregard the important work the RAC does. The subcommittees, meetings, time invested and feedback are valuable. The RAC was the instigator of expanding approved herbicides when there were only two allowed. A RAC letter to the president and BLM director spurred the change, although it took about 5 years.

Public Comment and Response: None.

Meeting adjourned at 3:30 p.m. for a tour of the BLM-managed Depot House historic site and newly-constructed Bakeoven crew quarters and work facility.

Friday, Oct. 20 –

Attendance:

RAC members Terry Drever Gee, Susie Koppert, Mary Fleischmann, Tom Mottl, Katy Nelson, Randy Jones, Steve Lent, Mia Sheppard, Shay White, Jim Reiss, Glenn Burleigh, Jerry Brummer and Greg Jackle.

Agency representatives: Shane DeForest, Vale BLM District Manager/Designated Federal Official; Amanda Roberts, Prineville BLM District Manager; Sarah Sherman, Vale BLM, Acting Baker Field Manager; Darren Goodding, Wallowa-Whitman NF (Zoom); Ann Merkle, Ochoco NF.

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator; Dan Shaneyfelt, Outdoor Recreational Planner, Prineville Deschutes Field Office; Nick Weber, Outdoor Recreational Planner, Prineville Deschutes Field Office; Mike Millay, Outdoor Recreation Planner, Prineville Deschutes Field Office; Kyle Hensley, Prineville BLM Central Oregon Field Manager; Nick Weber,

Public: Dre Golden; Renee Patrick; J.P. Patterson, Warm Springs Tribe Natural Resources; Marty Sheppard, Juniper River Adventures; Andy Kreipe, Deschutes River Adventures.

The meeting reconvened at 9 a.m.

Presentation: Barr North Campground business plan and fee proposal (attached) –

Daniel Shaneyfelt said one change had been made since the meeting materials were sent out. The District has decided not to propose a daily use fee and will only propose an overnight camping fee.

The Barr North area was built and developed in 2009. No fees have been charged up to now, but the cost of maintaining the current amenities has increased significantly.

The Cline Buttes Recreation Area is very popular and demand for OHV recreation is increasing. The Environmental Assessment calls for protecting values while providing access.

America the Beautiful passes are not accepted, because none of that money goes to the site. The proposed fee would be for increased amenities on site. The proposal is for \$12 a night plus \$5 per extra vehicle. Between December 2022 and August 2023, 1,750 vehicle visits were recorded. The fee would fund additional improvements as well as maintaining existing amenities, such as fire rings and picnic tables. No trash service will be offered due to significant problems with illegal dumping. Hazard tree mitigation, cleaning, maintenance, construction and landscaping are planned. Camping fees average \$0 to \$20 per night. What about low income users? There are other free and dispersed campsites in areas nearby.

Comment: Seventy percent of users don't stay overnight. Could the district install security cameras to deter illegal dumping? Will there be separate trails for horses if OHV use is allowed?

The district tries various enforcement techniques for dumping, but only has one law enforcement ranger. Another issue has been theft of cans. Yes, there will be separate horse trails. There are also grants available funded by Oregon OHV stickers and fuel tax and the Recreational Trails Program.

Comments: Will there be camp hosts? How will people be encouraged to pack out their trash? Outreach and signage are posted at all sites.

The district will be signing a Determination of NEPA Adequacy for the non-OHV side of Cline Buttes to designate an off-trail system and decommission 50 miles of trails to restore wildlife corridors.

Presentation: Eastern Oregon Aquatic and Riparian Restoration Environmental Assessment (attached) –

Emily Johnson, ORWA Fish Biologist said this EA addresses aquatic and riparian restoration across the east side districts. A similar EA was implemented for the west side districts in 2016. The intent of the EA is to address workload capacity issues for district staff by addressing similar projects. The added benefit is consistent use of conservation efforts. The document is being

reviewed at the district level now. The goal is to go out for public comment in early 2024 and be ready to implement by summer.

Shane DeForest explained how a Programmatic EA fits into district planning and environmental coordination. Does a programmatic EA replace local planning? No, the programmatic EA is much broader and also requires a Determination of NEPA Adequacy (DNA) before a district can utilize it. Some site-specific projects have been included Is it too late to add projects? The analysis is just starting, so a district could request to have a project added.

A Prineville restoration project at Thirtymile on the John Day River is part of the site-specific planning under the EA. It saves staff a tremendous amount of work and will allow the work to be implemented much sooner.

Comment: There are a lot of dry sites with intermittent water, does the project look at augmenting the water supply to grown vegetation and animals? There is potential for solar power to operate wells.

No, although the BLM did look at juniper thinning and removal to increase water. Water right acquisition can't be included at this level, but there are other opportunities to consider it.

Update: John Day River –

Nick Weber reported the district is developing a new boater guide to replace the 2005 edition. Many things have changed since then, plus the old one is out of print. It's a high public demand product and important for orientation and education. They've been collecting data for three years for the update. Now they're collecting feedback from the working group, public, state and tribal officials, and private partners. He hopes to see a final draft in the spring.

The district has contracted a third party to conduct a Needs Assessment and Commercial Allocation Study.

The common pool system implemented in 2020 has received a lot of public feedback and concerns that it's not working.

Providing recreational opportunities is at the core of multiple use, including guided recreation. Commercial use is a small part of the base, but it's important to users and the local economy. The study should be complete at the end of March and a workshop will be held with the public to determine how and what to make changes. It won't happen overnight. The district is also working to assist underserved groups. There is discretion to issue permits outside the system.

Does this apply to the McDonald's Ferry takeout site? Yes. What about put-ins? It extends to the last takeout before the waterfall.

How many campsites have been added or removed? Amanda will check and report back. What time of years are the on-site assessments being done? We tried to do peak season, but it started early and ran from May to July. Is dispersed camping allowed on the John Day River and is it addressed in the guide? Sites identified in the guide are technical dispersed, they are just identified as suitable.

Will the guide also identify what sites are suitable for different-size groups? Yes. Has the BLM considered technology, potentially with a QR code at kiosks so updates are more timely

regarding flow or use changes? The new guide will be geo-referenced, making it easier to adjust. Will it be sold? It was sold the last time. It will also be downloadable.

Public Comment and Response – Marty Sheppard said he’s operated an outfitter and guide service on the John Day River since 2003. He appreciates the work to assess the needs of allocation. The common pool system has been very challenging for outfitters, who have send a group letter of support to the BLM. His business is down 70 percent because of the common pool system. Last year he could only operate below Thirtymile. The new system has increased public river traffic and decreased outfitter traffic.

Andy Kreipe said he’s seen a huge increase in people wanting to rent rafting gear rather than hire an outfitter, which is a different kind of rafter. He suggested an additional rental Special Recreation Permit to offset this.

RAC member Mia Sheppard said anyone should be able to get a special recreation Special Recreation Permit. How is a permitted river so busy? Shuttle drivers are overwhelmed.

Are people boating without permits? Yes.

District Manager Amanda Roberts said most permits issued are used, and the district asks for permits to be returned if the recipient isn’t going to use it for some reason. Unpermitted use hasn’t been a major problem. The John Day River is a good entry for limited experience rafters. You don’t see as many rescues or other problems.

Vote: JDS RAC chair – Randy Jones said he really appreciated the opportunity to work with the RAC, but he is resigning to pursue other interests.

Motion to appoint Shay White chair passed unanimously. Motion to appoint Jim Reiss passed unanimously.

Roundtable –

Greg Jackle reported Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is working with the BLM on juniper restoration and the Malheur National Forest on “Green Dot” seasonal road restrictions to minimize wildlife disturbance and improve hunting under the Good Neighbor Authority.

What’s being done to keep cattle out of Green Dot areas? That’s not addressed in the closure. Typically cows are off the ground by hunting season. What about elk on private land? Hunters cannot harvest on private land and the point is to manage the elk population.

Jerry Brummer reported he’s retired from the Crook County Commission but is still an elected member of the Crook County Fire and Rescue Board.

Shay White said Idaho County sent a letter to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest to help with control of invasive goatheads (puncturevine). They are being found in Wallowa County now, too.

Mia Sheppard said she’s seen aoudad sheep 50 miles from the private ranch that owns them. This is a big concern because of the potential to spread disease.

Are they considered livestock? They aren't tagged. Some were released back in the 1960s and are now feral. The counties are still deciding how to address the problem. What if they are shot on public lands? There are no game laws protecting them, they fall under the Department of Agriculture. If you see one, notify state and federal agencies.

Steve Lent took part in a search for old graves around Rimrock Springs, but it was too dry for the cadaver dogs to scent. Some of the graves are 200 years old.

Tom Mottl asked if the RAC should form a housing subcommittee to advocate for affordable staff housing.

Mary Fleischmann said Great Old Broads are excited to see the BLM is looking at encompassing language to put conservation on the same level as other values.

Susie Koppert talked about the potential for reclamation fees to be used for educational kiosks and vault toilets at sites. The problem is if toilets are installed, they must be cleaned and maintained. There are grants and other means of getting infrastructure without fees.

Wrap-up – It was decided to meet Feb. 22-23 in Condon; June 6-7 in Baker City; and Sept. 25-26 in Burns for a joint meeting with the Southeast Oregon RAC.

The meeting adjourned at 12:36 p.m.