

Notes

John Day-Snake Resource Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday-Friday, June 6-7, 2024

Thursday, June 6 -

Attendance:

RAC members Chairman Shay White, Katy Nelson, Mary Fleischmann, Greg Jackle, Susie Koppert, Andrew Hartenstein, Mia Sheppard, Steve Lent, Jerry Brummer, Terry Drever Gee

Agency representatives: Shane DeForest, Vale BLM District Manager/Designated Federal Official; Amanda Roberts, Prineville BLM District Manager; Sarah Sherman, Vale BLM, Baker Field Manager

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator

Public: Dre Golden, Renee Patrick, Janelle Ghiorso, Theresa Barbour/Val Cecama-Hogsett

The meeting convened at 9 a.m. PT

Effects of the wolf policy on the people in our area

RAC member Katy Nelson read a prepared statement regarding wolf policies and management in northeastern Oregon and wolf impacts on local communities.

Designated Federal Official Report/Agency Updates (attached)

Prineville BLM (attached) — District Manager Amanda Roberts thanked the RAC for their attendance and service.

Due to heavy use, the district is developing a designated campground at Priest Hole Recreation Area. A proposed fee, which will be presented at a future meeting for a formal RAC recommendation, will be used to maintain the site and amenities.

The district has received six solar rights-of-way proposals and is moving forward with Environmental Impact Statements for two. There will be many opportunities for public participation.

Deschutes County is looking at landfill sites, including one adjacent to the Badlands Wilderness, which would require an environmental impact statement for a new right-of-way across BLM-managed lands.

Oregon Department of State Lands has indicated interest in acquiring two parcels from the district as part of its original statehood land grants.

The district has submitted a Land and Water Conservation Fund proposal to acquire 655 acres as Core habitat for spotted frogs and mule deer winter range and migration along Paulina Creek and the Little Deschutes River.

The district is working to contract for two houses with a total of 12 beds to provide housing for fire staff conducting fuels reduction and pre-commercial thinning.

Does the Horse Ridge Travel Management Plan Environmental Assessment address eBikes? Yes, there are two areas being scoped for three classes: pedal assist, full operation under 20 mph and full operation under 28 mph.

Why does Horse Ridge include 10-year grazing permits? All BLM grazing permits are for 10 years, however, there is potential for rest requirements during that time. How is it monitored? Range staff try to visit every allotment at least once a year.

Andrew Hartenstein brought up the need stewardship along the John Day River in the Clarno area. There's been a huge increase in public use, parking overflows and the Rangeland Fire Protection Association is reporting 20 campfires any given weekend. The district has increased monitoring and patrols in the area, but it doesn't own the boat launch. He encouraged working out a cohesive management plan.

Steve Lent asked about new fire crew quarters. This is a top priority, but it could take up to 10 years to build new facilities, but the district is open to other options, including leasing facilities from the county or another entity.

Vale BLM (attached) — The National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center had 2,000 visitors during its reopening weekend and is averaging 500-600 visitors per day. This brings revenue to Baker County and the community.

South Fork Walla Walla Area of Critical Environmental Concern Environmental Assessment — An interdisciplinary team is working to develop alternatives after pausing to conduct key research into prior existing routes and rights-of-way held by private landowners. District leadership recently met with cooperating agencies, who agreed access is a key issue, but what does that look like? The BLM road to the trailhead was completely destroyed and several sections of Forest Service right of way were severely damaged. How will recreation and access be managed along with environmental protections? A draft may be released for public comment later this summer, with a decision sometime after that.

Baker Field Office staff are working with the Baker Local Implementation Team to develop a weed wash station at Virtue Flat Off-Highway Recreation Area to prevent the transfer of invasive and noxious weeds.

Overstay campers are a problem and law enforcement rangers worked with Umatilla County to clean up a site.

Many projects are moving forward, including two lithium exploration proposals on the Nevada border. Scoping has ended for the Grassy Mountain gold mine environmental impact statement (EIS) and staff are compiling the scoping report.

The Boardman to Hemingway (B2H) proposal is undergoing a compliance review. In the meantime, Idaho Power is working to secure additional permits required by the state for construction on public lands.

District fire managers are concerned about the potential for significant fires this year, as the district has not had an above average fire season since 2015, and no large fires since 2017.

RAC member Terry Drever Gee praised the BLM's partnership with Crossroads Carnegie Art Center to establish a Friends of NHOTIC group and with Baker Heritage Museum to temporarily house NHOTIC during renovations. A major Western art show with ties to NHOTIC's opening in 1992 also enhanced the reopening.

Andrew Hartenstein asked what has helped reduce fires. Primarily the luck of the draw. Multiple lightning starts stretch resources, but the district has not had major lightning busts. Amanda Roberts said the same applies to Prineville. The district had 400+ starts last year, but was able to catch them while they were small. That's not always the case.

Steve Lent asked about fine fuels. It varies across the district. Many areas have had multiple grass crops due to intermittent precipitation, plus there is thatch built up on the ground.

Terry Drever Gee asked why there were no representatives from the Forest Service at the meeting, as the RAC serves them as well.

Presentation: Fire Season Outlook (PPT attached)

Francis Tyler, fire planner for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, said it's foolish to try to predict fire season, but the June outlook calls for higher temperatures and fire risk. The July-Sept outlook shows a typical fire season, with a decent chance of higher than normal fire activity.

The Idaho and eastern Oregon outlook for June precipitation is below average, but pretty normal for July through September. Baker County has received 6 inches of precipitation to date for the year, somewhat below the normal 7 inches. The Burns area, on the other hand, has received a lot more rain than normal, nearly 10 inches to date.

Precipitation is a big factor because it stimulates fine fuel growth, which builds up fuel beds.

It must be challenging to spot and locate fires. Aviation support is very helpful, but boots on the ground are what puts fires out. A shift to cameras rather than towers allows 24-hour monitoring, but someone has to be watching the cameras. Satellite technology is getting better, and heat sensors can help locate fires in overcast or smoky conditions. What about Remote Automatic Weather Stations? Fire managers use them routinely, they play a large part in determining fire weather.

How do conditions correlate to campfire bans on public lands? For example, one ban started June 1. Is that routine, or is it influenced? Decisions are often based on fire history, when fire managers know fuels are readily available to burn. Sometimes the same dates are used because people are accustomed to it. It gets more complicated if you try to separate higher and lower elevations, even though risks are often higher at lower elevation. Fire managers review reports every week and have action points in place to help make determinations. Much of the information is available to the public as well, through NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) in Pendleton and the Northwest Coordination Center website.

Presentation: Greater Sage-grouse Approved Resource Management Plan Amendment (PPT attached)

Angel Dawson, Oregon-Washington BLM planner

This is a focused amendment, meaning it is not considering everything. It addresses grazing in key Research Natural Areas based on specific habitat and vegetation conditions. It also incorporates new science and data.

Habitat connectivity is an important component, as some populations are isolated. The overall biggest impact to sage-grouse is wildfire.

Oregon has priority and general habitat, most of which is on BLM-managed lands. The amendment does not apply to private property, state or Tribal lands.

The preferred alternative (5) incorporates the most successful components of the 2015 and 2019 amendments and calls for a focus on conservation with flexibility for site-specific development. Alternative 3 would make sage-grouse a priority over other uses and would require Congressional action to implement.

Public comments will be accepted through June 13. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries, Oregon Department of Transportation, and the governor's office were invited to comment as well.

Another amendment addressing minerals is being analyzed separately. A new Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement will defer to the Sage-grouse ARMPA if there are conflicts between the two.

Will this change how grazing is managed? No, grazing will continue under existing management plans and rangeland health standards. How will fences be impacted? Fences provide perches for predators and sage-grouse get caught in them. Flagging the top strand is not as effective as previously believed.

Andrew Hartenstein noted that properly-managed grazing has not been detrimental, but pulling out fences would affect ranchers' ability to manage it. The amendment is only looking at new fences, not existing ones. Traditional fencing or modern fencing? Modern fencing is being used for wildlife exclosures.

How will the overlap between Wild Horse and Burro and sage-grouse management be handled. Horses graze differently. The plan calls for managing herds at appropriate management levels (AML). Most herd management areas (HMAs) in Oregon are above AML. Will the plan address protection of priority areas? Would there be more horse gathers? This was addressed in Alternative 3 and could be incorporated into the final EIS if there is public support for it.

Presentation: History of Deschutes River Railroad (PPT attached)

RAC member Steve Lent gave an informative presentation about the fight to complete a rail route into the Deschutes River Canyon to the Columbia River.

1:45 p.m. Public Comment and Response: None.

Field Trip: Tour recently reopened National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center and repository.

Meeting adjourned for the day at 4:30 p.m.

Friday, June 7 –

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.

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator; Melissa Yzquierdo Primus, Vale BLM Baker Field Office biologist; Brian Woolf, Vale BLM Baker Field Office recreation

planner; John Rademacher, Vale BLM Baker Field Office supervisory natural resources specialist.

Public: Dre Golden, Renee Patrick, Janelle Ghiorso, Theresa Barbour/Val Cecama-Hogsett

The meeting reconvened at 9 a.m.

Presentation: Virtue Flat Off Highway Vehicle Area — Managing for Multiple Use

(PPTs attached)

Vale BLM Baker Field Office biologist Melissa Yzquierdo Primus said the Baker sage-grouse Priority Area of Conservation (PAC) is the northern-most range in Oregon. Sage-grouse are like a canary in a coal mine, they are quickly affected by changes to their habitat, which alerts land managers to problems. The Baker PAC population began to show a decline in 2011 after being consistent since the 1980s. Peaks and troughs are normal, but fluctuations are much wider now. To combat the issue in Baker County and other locations, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife established Local Implementation Teams (LITs) made up of landowners, non-governmental organizations and state and federal agencies to look for solutions and support projects that benefit habitat. The Baker LIT spans the area between Durkee, LaGrande, Unity and Richland and the Baker PAC lies within that area. A landscape-level assessment in 2022 showed the BLM is doing the right things, but the population is still declining.

An example of the BLM's mandate to balance uses of public lands, the district has a 5,000-acre OHV area on within the PAC, which is also home to one of the oldest leks in Oregon (as shown documented in Oregon Trail records). The area is protected during breeding season by a seasonal closure of 500 acres surrounding the site.

The BLM has also worked closely with partners to implement cross-boundary treatments for noxious and invasive weeds. Another innovation by the LIT is a proposed weed wash station at the entrance to the Virtue Flat OHV Area. Studies have shown that power washing the undercarriage of vehicles helps prevent the spread of seeds from invasive annual grasses and noxious weeds.

Once the weed wash station is up and running, there will be an educational outreach to explain its purpose and value. Will it be required? That hasn't been determined yet, but it would require staffing to enforce. The RAC can help message why it's important and encourage stewardship.

The RAC can help raise awareness about the purpose and need for weed washing. How do weeds affect the population decline? Invasive grasses and noxious weeds outcompete native vegetation, and also increase the risk of fires. What about range improvements versus weed washing and weed treatments? We are doing both. Some years there are excessive weed crops and an herbicide treatment is more effective. Is weed spraying harmful? We only use it for certain projects and try to time the application for specific conditions. All herbicides used have been analyzed and that information is available to the public.

If sage-grouse aren't endangered, why are OHV trails being closed to protect them? And why hunting them banned in Idaho but allowed in Oregon? They are eligible for listing, but the

current actions are intended to prevent listing. Hunting is restricted in areas where broods have not been successful, but hunting is a recreational use that has to be balanced with other uses.

Public comments indicated concerns about vandalism and supported building it closer to the highway. What happens to the debris? It goes into a settling tank and is re-used. The tank is cleaned out as needed. Are there other places with weed wash stations? It's been used on wildfires for many years. Recreationally, the Forest Service has one in Wisconsin. Closer to home, there is another park in Oregon that has one.

Virtue Flat OHV Area was first created by motocross users in the 1970s. Today, it is one of the few, if not the only, site where all four classes of off-highway vehicles can enjoy 60 miles of designated trails, including rock crawls and other challenges. A local professional dirt bike rider often promotes it through social media. Recreation rangers patrol the site periodically to educate and inform users, encourage the reduction and prevention of resource damage, and promote safe riding. Baker County Sheriff's Office provides a safe riding class for ages 16 and under and there is a practice area for youth riders. These amenities are funded by the Oregon OHV sticker program.

Are injuries and accidents tracked? Nothing more serious than a broken arm has been reported. The site has cell service and a hospital is just 10 miles away.

9:15 a.m. Public Comment and Response – Dre Golden asked for more information about the proposed landfill near the Badlands Wilderness on the Prineville District.

It was decided to have the meeting **Wrap-up** before the field tours so members could leave for home at their conclusion.

Terry Drever Gee asked why Forest Service representatives have not attended recent meetings, as the Forests have been active participants since the RAC's inception. This facilitates discussions about shared priorities, information sharing, building relationships and relaying information to the public. Chairman Shay White said he plans to write a letter asking about the absences. He joined the RAC because of his interest in Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and desire to build a relationship with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. Vale District Manager Shane DeForest explained this is a recreation RAC and the Forests are only required to participate when they need a recommendation for fee proposals. Greg Jackle suggested sending a representative if a Forest Supervisor or District Ranger is unable to attend. At minimum, someone could Zoom in for the agency updates portion of the meeting. Jerry Brummer noted members can't ask questions about the agency updates when representatives are not present. Prineville District Manager Amanda Roberts acknowledged it's helpful to have an established relationship before bringing a fee proposal before the RAC and suggested the RAC ask for some clarification of expectations.

The meeting adjourned to the field tours at 9:45 a.m.

Field tours: Virtue Flat OHV Area; and Baker Heritage Museum.