

Notes

John Day-Snake Resource Advisory Council Meeting

Wednesday-Thursday, Sept. 25-26, 2024

Wednesday, Sept. 25 -

Attendance:

RAC members Chairman Shay White, Katy Nelson, Mary Fleischmann, Susie Koppert, Andrew Hartenstein, Cole Hendrickson, Jerry Brummer, Terry Drever Gee. Zoom: Tom Mottl

Agency representatives: Zoom: Shane DeForest, Vale BLM District Manager/Designated Federal Official; Amanda Roberts, Prineville BLM District Manager; Nick Weber, Prineville BLM; Walter Lowell, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; Isabella Isaksen, Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River Grassland

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator

Public: Janelle Ghiorso; Theresa Barbour/Val Cecama-Hogsett, Central Oregon Wild Horse Coalition; Linda Wallace; Anne White, Oregon Natural Desert Association

The meeting convened at approximately 9 a.m. PT

Designated Federal Official Report/Agency Updates (attached)

Vale BLM (attached) — District Manager Shane DeForest reported that visitation at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center is back to pre-construction levels since reopening May 24. Due to multiple large wildfires on the district, a great deal of project and program work was postponed to allow staff to support fire and post-fire work.

There were sage-grouse habitat concerns before these fires, were there impacts from them? Yes, the Baker Priority Area of Conservation sustained some impacts. Declining leks were not affected, but there were impacts to the habitat. Staff are working on plans for aerial herbicide (weed) spraying, seeding, and eventually shrub planting.

Will the McDermitt lithium exploration Environmental Assessments be available for public comment? Yes. The RAC will be notified when it opens.

Prineville BLM (attached) — District Manager Amanda Roberts reminded the RAC that fuel loading was discussed during the June meeting. Prineville has experienced the largest fire year on record, with the first team fire starting June 14. There is still one complex team managing a fire on the district now. Typically the district experiences 310 fires per year. The total for 2024 so far is 989.

Staff are continuing to develop a business plan for the Priest Hole Recreation Site. The RAC will receive an update later in this meeting and will be asked for a formal recommendation in late 2025.

The Deschutes Field Office (DFO) is actively working on two solar applications. Deschutes County has selected the Moon Pit site on private land adjacent to the Oregon Badlands

Wilderness for the future Deschutes County landfill. The county will need to obtain a right-of-way from the BLM for the use of the road.

How will solar arrays work with other uses? That would be addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement, which hasn't begun yet and will include opportunities for public comment. The selected alternative does not have to be the proponent's proposal.

It's been a wet fall around Prineville and there is a lot of cheatgrass. Is it possible to allow more grazing to reduce fuels? Sometimes there is flexibility in the grazing permit that allows additional grazing within the authorized period of use. Otherwise it requires environmental review or a special authority.

Is fire suppression funded separately from recovery and rehabilitation, or are they separate? Staff time can be charged to fire accounts, which allows district funds to be reallocated for other work. Some rehabilitation work is included in the last days of suppression, such as dozer and handline repair. There is also emergency recovery funding available after a fire.

Do solar projects include set aside funds for when the technology becomes obsolete? There are stipulations in the authorities that address remediation. Perhaps the BLM could look into a bonding system like the one used for mining, which is reviewed and revised every 5 years. Crook County has used bonding successfully by tying it to the Consumer Price Index.

Will the proposed Redmond Wastewater Pollution Control Facility expand the use of surface or groundwater in the Deschutes Basin? Amanda Roberts said she was not sure, but would find out. Is the plant going on BLM land? It is adjacent, and the BLM would permit 500 acres for the wetlands lagoon. This will require an amendment to the existing Resource Management Plan.

When will the Thirtymile EA come out? That is one of the projects delayed by the volume of fires, but Amanda Roberts said she will check.

Ochoco National Forest (attached) — Public Affairs Officer Isabella Isaksen summarized the three large fires still active on the district: Rail, Wiley Flat and Crazy Creek. The

Mill Creek Dry Forest Restoration Project was signed in August and timber sales are being prepared now for auction later this fall. In July, the forest initiated scoping for the Jackson Watershed Fuel Breaks project, which is now being impacted by the Crazy Creek wildfire. It will be reassessed after the fire is fully contained.

It seems like wildfires have impacted 16 percent or more of the 850,000 acre forest, is that correct? Approximately.

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (attached) — Public Affairs Officer Walter Lowell said the Blue Mountain Forest Plan will have an announcement later this week. The Hat Point Lookout in Hells Canyon is closed to the public until repairs can be made to the steps, railings and structural concerns.

The forest has conducted 33,000 acres of prescriptive burning so far this year and will do more this fall and winter when conditions allow. Double Creek Fire hazard tree mitigation continues along Forest Road 4240 (Hat Point Road).

In Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, two bridges at the Kirkwood historic ranch are being replaced and will be ready for the public to use at the end of this month and the new dock at Cache Creek is fully functional. Shay White commented that the new stock bridge is great, "you

could drive a tank over it.” AEDs (automated external defibrillators) and emergency backboards to support emergency medical responses at Cache Creek, Pittsburg Landing, and Kirkwood were provided by Northwest River Runners. Mary Fleischmann praised the availability of life jackets at Pittsburgh Landing.

Does the forest have any plans for mining? The Powder River Mine Plan was just released and is posted to <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=45945>.

Presentation: Priest Hole Recreation Site and Fee Proposal (PPT attached)

Nick Weber, Prineville District Central Oregon Field Office Assistant Field Manager said recreation in Central Oregon continues to grow and the district is limited in its capacity to develop campgrounds and other amenities. The original site had a boat launch, portable toilet and dispersed camping. Plans call for the creation of 15 developed campsites with fire pits, picnic tables and vault toilets, plus 45 acres of planting for screening and wildlife. These improvements will improve water quality and fish and wildlife habitat in addition to “organizing the chaos.” Plans also call for development of sites at Burnt Ranch and Thirtymile (the environmental assessment is under way

The current recreation site fee of \$5 per night has not changed since 1998. Revenues average about \$6,500 per year, which does not cover the cost of staffing to remove trash, maintain the existing sites and collect fees. Visitation has grown to approximately 26,240 users per year. While there are various funding sources for recreation, none of them fund campgrounds. All revenue will go back into the three new sites and four existing fee sites.

Because proposals must be made available to the public for comment at the sites during peak season, this plan will not be posted until April 2025. If all goes according to plan, the RAC will be asked to make a recommendation in September 2025 and the new fees will be implemented in May 2026.

What is the proposed fee amount? The district is looking at \$15 to \$20. The exact amount will be listed in the proposed business plan when it is posted for public comment. Fees for similar sites in the area average \$18. It’s going to be a big jump, but users have had 26 years of below-cost fees.

Does the district have any information about a Dark Skies proposal for the area between Mitchell and the Ochoco Mountains? Families are concerned about safety if there are no lights. No, but there is a Dark Skies movement.

Katy Nelson said Harney County recently rejected a Dark Skies proposal. She personally supports it, as she can see light from Prairie City from her home 17 miles away. Andrew Hartenstein added there is interest around Antelope as well, and he hasn’t heard anything negative about it. Larisa Bogardus clarified that Dark Skies do not shut off lights in an area, it simply calls for shading lights so the light is aimed at the ground rather than skyward. Could there be lights out hours for Dark Skies viewing, similar to Leave No Trace principles?

Going back to the fee proposal, would this be in addition to the river permit fee(s)? Yes. Could the district implement scan to pay kiosks? Cell service is poor, but there are new kiosks that use satellite technology. Regardless, not everyone has access to technology, or wants to use it, so physical payments would still have to be accepted.

Andrew Hartenstein asked if additional signage regarding road conditions could be posted in the Burnt Ranch area, as motorists are constantly getting stuck when the road is muddy.

Public Comment and Response – Theresa Barbour of the Central Oregon Wild Horse Coalition asked if any wild horses in the Murderers Creek Herd Management Area have hurt or killed in the Rail Ridge Fire. Speaking for the BLM, Amanda Roberts said the fire is still in suppression mode, but no reports have been received from firefighters or law enforcement of horses being trapped, injured or killed due to wildfire. The BLM and Forest Service are meeting to discuss impacts to the herd and forage. Ms. Barbour said volunteers with her organization is willing to help in any way possible.

Break for lunch and optional field tour of Nez Perce Wallowa Homeland Visitor Center.

The meeting resumed at 1:45 p.m.

Presentation: Fire Season Recap (PPT attached)

Prineville BLM Fire Management Officer James Osborne said end of season statistics are not yet available because of the number of active large fires still burning. The fire forecast for central Oregon was for significant fire potential, which materialized. Weeks of above average temperatures and a precipitation deficit combined with record fine fuel loads created a perfect storm of conditions.

On July 12, the National Weather Service issued a Fuels and Fire Behavior Advisory due to significant potential for fire spread. Within a week, the region went from Preparedness Level 3 to Preparedness Level 5 due to the number of large fires in eastern Oregon. Before the lightning events in July, a number of starts were human-caused. One storm recorded 3,500 lightning strikes. Are lightning starts common? This year most were dry storms, which increased the number of starts.

Are we out of the woods now? We hope so, but we're taking it one week at a time. There's been a record number of no rain days, but the chances of a season-ending event increase every day. More fires are in repair mode now, but several are still active.

Amanda Roberts noted that during major fires all district staff help out, helping dispatch, transporting firefighters and supplies, working with firefighters to identify resource values and strategies for protecting them, and much more. At one point during the season, 27,000 personnel were assigned to fires. A normal season is about 17,000.

Presentation: Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (PPT attached)

Vale District Manager Shane DeForest provided an overview of what happens after a fire is contained. Emergency Stabilization (ES) work starts immediately and can take up to a year. Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) follows and lasts one to five years.

An ES plan is submitted to the national office within 7 days. If approved and funded, an accelerated NEPA review begins, but still includes scoping, public comment and a decision. Activities may include fence repair, hazard tree removal, and weed treatments, among others. BAR plans are submitted within 21 days and follow the same process, with the addition of monitoring, adjusting and revising during the course of the work.

People often rely on burn severity maps to determine the extent of damage. They are a tool, but they don't tell the whole story. In desert landscapes, shrubs, grasses and forbs cannot regenerate if the root structure is damaged. Soils can be damaged as well.

An Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) looks at a long list of factors to plan for ES and BAR. Sometimes a Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) team is brought in to help assess and develop a plan of work. To date, the US has spent \$17 million on ES and \$21 million on BAR work, and there is still a great deal of work to be done.

Is rehabilitation funding limited to federal lands, or can it be used on private property? It's mainly on federal lands, but the Wyden Amendment allows the use of funds on private property if it benefits public lands. Road work, weed treatments and other work have been funded this way. Due to the volume of work to be done this year, this authority will be used extensively. More assistance is available to private landowners through other federal programs and partners.

After so many fires, it is hard to get contractors. Is there potential to form cooperatives or let permittees run cows together? We are exploring the use of unscheduled livestock use. For example, a permittee may have 10,000 AUMs, but only use 2,000.

Anne White, ONDA, asked when the HiTech EA would be available for public comment. Probably after the new year. Again, many projects are delayed due to the scale of fires this year. We appreciate the public's patience and understanding.

Presentation: Wallowa Resources (PPT attached)

Marci Schreider, Wallowa Resources Program Director, spoke about how collaboration and shared resources have grown the organization since it started in the 1990s after several timber mills shut down, cutting employment by 30 percent. Starting with two staffers, the group now has 30, plus 10-15 interns. Today, the organization focuses on three pillars – land/ water stewardship, education/resources, and community/ economic development.

Programs range from land acquisition/recreation development to virtual fencing/weed treatments for agriculture to home energy assessments/improvements. Housing is a huge challenge for middle-income workers. The group has purchased an apartment building and is in the early stages of an affordable housing development.

Partnerships with the Forest Service and BLM have helped with noxious weed work along the Grande Ronde and Snake Rivers.

A K-12 educational program offers Friday programming that exposes students to all areas of work Wallowa Resources is a part of.

A new economic development effort is biomass – using smaller diameter wood to make mulch, fence posts, plywood and other materials.

RAC members agreed organizations like Wallowa Resources could be a huge benefit to all rural communities in Oregon. Baker County is in the process of forming a similar group.

Meeting adjourned for the day at 4 p.m. It was decided to start at 8:30 a.m. Thursday with the meeting wrap-up, as a RAC member needs to leave the meeting early.

Thursday, Sept. 26 –

Attendance:

RAC members Katy Nelson, Mary Fleischmann, Susie Koppert, Andrew Hartenstein, Cole Hendrickson, Jerry Brummer, Terry Drever Gee.

Agency representatives: Zoom: Shane DeForest, Vale BLM District Manager/Designated Federal Official; Amanda Roberts, Prineville BLM District Manager; Walter Lowell, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; Isabella Isaksen, Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River Grassland; Todd Curtis, BLM Oregon-Washington Deputy State Director.

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator

Public: Janelle Ghiorso; Linda Wallace;

The meeting reconvened at 8:30 a.m.

Set CY2025 meeting dates/locations and identify future meeting topics/presentations

It was decided to meet March 12-13, 2025, in Condon; and June 25-26, 2025, in Madras. September or October meeting dates will be selected during the March meeting.

Future topics/presentations: Dark Skies, including proposals in Oregon, process for certification, potential impacts and mitigations; Prineville BLM solar projects; potential wind farm tour; North Pole Ridge WSA; Thirtymile update; Pelton Dam tour (ODFW and DEQ; Warm Springs Museum tour.

Presentation: BLM Public Lands Rule (PPT attached)

Patricia Johnston, BLM Lead Project Manager for the Public Lands Rule, said the initiative is based on informed decision-making based on science-based and Indigenous knowledge, with an emphasis on Tribal engagement. It also updates criteria for management of Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs), which has not been updated since 1988.

A national Interdisciplinary Team is being set up now and state IDTs will follow. A PLR National Federal Advisory Committee will be established, similar to the Wild Horse and Burro Advisory Council. In FY25 the Rule will be fully implemented, with written guidance and webinars to teach staff how to apply the Rule.

Does the PLR supersede existing regulations, or is it completely new? Some of both. It helps establish consistency and introduces a new way of accomplishing the BLM's work. Restoration and mitigation leases are new, and land health standard will be applied across the landscape (previously they only applied to grazing). It also creates a consistent system of measurement and a central tracking system.

Will this conflict with mining interests? All existing laws and rules, including the 1872 Mining Law and locatable minerals laws, will take priority. One change is that in the past mining mitigation has been limited to private property, now it can be applied to public lands. So mitigation could be applied within the same geographic area? Yes.

Has Oregon-Washington identified pilot sites for implementation? Yes, the plan is to continue current habitat restoration work in the Southeast Oregon Sage-grouse Focal Area and ecological restoration in southwest Oregon. If a third project is allowed, it will be riparian areas on the Prineville District. Efforts will be concentrated on completion work with public, private and Tribal engagement.

Roundtable —

Katy Nelson reported Grant County is developing a management agreement for the wild and feral horses of Murderers Creek to protect the horses and riparian areas. She agrees with a Forest Service decision to remove horses from the HMA, which is overpopulated.

Ten percent of Grant County has burned due to large fires this season, and a significant amount of forage has been lost. The Forest Service does not have funding to feed the horses. She encouraged the public to pressure elected officials to support their care.

Jerry Brummer reported Crook County is working with DEQ on permitting for a biomass plant that would remove juniper and restore groundwater. The Prineville museum has a new facility for rotating exhibits that RAC members may want to visit if they are in the area.

Susie Koppert said she is working with OMSI (Oregon Museum of Science and Industry) to provide recreational rockhounding outreach to youth and special needs adults, with an emphasis on the importance of reclamation. She is also working on a program for disabled veterans to collect within the Sunstone Public Collection Area on the Lakeview District.

10:15 a.m. Public Comment and Response – Janelle Ghiorso is a member of an Oregon wild horse organization. She expressed concern about forage availability within the Murderers Creek Herd Management Area due to wildfire and asked if any horses were injured or killed. Katy Nelson said she knew cows were lost, but hadn't heard anything about horses. Shane DeForest said the Forest Service and BLM are having ongoing conversations about strategies to address post-fire forage needs. An emergency gather may be needed to remove some horses which would then be returned to the range when forage is restored. What about livestock? Post-fire rest periods are required for grazing allotments. The extent of that rest is based on landscape assessments and the type(s) of rehabilitation. Specific guidelines are in each Resource Management Plan. What about wildlife? That is managed by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, which has a variety of options depending on severity.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 a.m.