

## **Steens Mountain Advisory Council**

### **FINAL January 29-30, 2015 Summary Minutes**

The Steens Mountain Advisory Council (SMAC) met January 29-30, 2015, in Hines, Oregon. 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 a conflict of interest, Council members absent themselves from the meeting when the Council discusses matters in which a conflict of interest may occur.

#### *Council members participating:*

David Bilyeu (Vice Chair, State Environmental representative),  
Stacy Davies (Grazing Permittee representative),  
Fred Otley (Private Landowner representative),  
Mark Bagett (Fish and Recreational Fishing representative),  
Cecil Dick (Burns Paiute Tribe Member representative, Friday only),  
Leon Pielstick (Wild Horse Management representative), and  
Daniel Haak (Chair, Mechanized or Consumptive Recreation representative).

#### *Members not participating:*

Richard Jenkins (Recreational Permit Holder representative),  
Pam Hardy (Dispersed Recreation representative),  
Grazing Permittee (vacant),  
Local Environmental representative (vacant),  
No Financial Interest representative (vacant), and  
State Liaison (vacant).

#### *Other participants/observers/presenters:*

Rhonda Karges (Andrews/Steens Resource Area Field Manager), Designated Federal Official (DFO),  
Karen Moon (Harney County Watershed Council, Thursday only),  
Dave Toney (Fire Management Officer, Burns Interagency Fire Zone, Thursday only),  
Eric Haakenson (Burns BLM Outdoor Recreation Planner, Thursday only),  
Mandy DeCroo (Burns BLM Outdoor Recreation Planner, Thursday only),  
Dan Morse (Oregon Natural Desert Association, Thursday only),  
Dean Whitt (Burns BLM Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist – Recreation, Thursday only),  
Andy Daniels (Burns BLM Wildlife Biologist, Thursday only),  
Casey O'Connor (Burns Interagency Fire Zone Fire Planner, Thursday only),  
Jarod Lemos (Burns BLM Fisheries/Riparian Biologist, Friday only),  
Brendan Cain (Burns District Manager), and  
Tara Martinak (Burns BLM Public Affairs Specialist/SMAC Coordinator).

### **JANUARY 29, 2015**

Tara Martinak opened the meeting with a review of the day's agenda and handouts provided to Council members/available to the public. Those in attendance introduced themselves before moving into the agenda.

### **FIRE AND INVASIVES ASSESSMENT TEAM UPDATE**

Casey O'Connor stated the Fire and Invasives Assessment Team (FIAT) came from the original Conservation Objective Team (COT) that originated through the Fish and Wildlife Service, who addressed all the big threats to sage grouse. O'Connor shared a publication about resistance resilience concepts for sage grouse habitat to determine what options are available at a given site. A three step

process was identified to look at the threats:

- 1) identifying Priority Areas of Concern (PAC) – boundaries came from the COT, which are primarily Sage grouse driven.
- 2) release publication and PAC area information to Districts and develop District Assessment Teams (Casey is the lead for the Burns District) to develop priority project planning areas and identify the purpose and need of how to protect Sage grouse habitat. There are four management strategies within step two – these are: fuels management, habitat recovery and restoration, fire operations, and post-fire rehabilitation. The Burns District Assessment Team has a collaborative approach with “all hand all lands.”
- 3) NEPA process and project implementation.

Fred Otley asked about how the PACs were selected, and O'Connor and Daniels agreed that the areas being looked at are basically “the best of the best” at this point. Stacy Davies asked if it is SageCon driving the process, or RMP amendments, etc.? How does the FIAT tie in to all the other Sage grouse habitat protection efforts? O'Connor felt the FIAT was contributing to the fire and resource allocation part of the process. Davies stated he was at the SageCon meetings when things were getting started and wondered about the challenges of the implementation. Are the Resource Management Plan (RMP) amendments going to be consistent, and how do they interface between other NEPA documents like the North Steens Ecosystem Restoration Project, etc.? Otley wondered about the procedures for areas outside the PACs – funding will be likely be limited, along with personnel to do work there, etc. Those areas will be guided by the RMPs.

Davies asked about the possibility of using fire for resource benefit through the FIAT process. O'Connor stated it might be doable if all the pre-planning was done up front.

### **VEGETATIVE RESPONSE TO FIRE IN STEENS**

Andy Daniels, BLM Wildlife Biologist, led the discussion on vegetative response to fire over the last 25 years in the Steens area. Unfortunately, compiling and analyzing this type of data isn't something we can do through the Joint Fire Science Program, so we are looking into some project proposals to get grant funding to hire people for this effort. Daniels may try to get it through the FIAT as well and encouraged the SMAC to let him know if they were aware of any outside funding sources that may be interested in this type of project.

Rhonda Karges reminded the SMAC that the BLM has a ton of monitoring data already, but the SMAC asked for an *outside* entity to compile and analyze all that data...in conjunction with other data available from the Agricultural Research Service and others.

Davies felt confused by the conversation and what the SMAC's original recommendation was on vegetation response. Davies felt the SMAC was really asking for a look at “what happened” – go into an area that we know burned at a certain time, and see how it looks today: a glimpse at what has developed in fire areas since they were first burned (not exactly a monitoring analysis, but just a synopsis of vegetative response). Otley agreed and thought this type of review would make for a great historical snapshot. The BLM generally does not receive significant funding to complete long-term post-fire monitoring, so the SMAC's request is very relevant. The original SMAC recommendation was clarified to be less of a research request and more of a compilation of monitoring data and an overall report on vegetative response – after 25 years, not just the required 3-year response for BLM's Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation process. Davies stated there is a large disconnect between some agencies/managers that don't actually see the ground they are making decisions for, and this kind of data would great to have on hand – regularly.

Karges was not sure how to proceed further with the conversation and asked if the SMAC would like to

discuss it further on their own, perhaps at dinner, and then revisit the subject the following day. The conversation continued about what the SMAC was really looking for regarding post-fire monitoring data, and it was agreed that Davies' summary was accurate – an overall report on vegetative response. The SMAC decided to add this conversation to the following day's agenda.

### **NATIONAL LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION SYSTEM (NLCS) SIGN PLAN**

Dean Whitt, BLM Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist for Recreation, introduced himself and stated the Washington Office is mandating a change to all signage within NLCS lands within the U.S., preferably in the year 2015. The first step in this project is an overall Sign Plan, which is being led and coordinated by Mandy DeCroo, Burns District Outdoor Recreation Planner. DeCroo then addressed the Council and first recognized the SMAC's many efforts and conversations regarding signage in the Steens Mountain Cooperative Management and Protection Area (CMPA). The SMAC efforts have not gone overlooked, but we are in a difficult situation with the new mandate from the Washington Office. All NLCS units are to eventually move to "standard" signage; however, the CMPA was selected as one of 40+ sites to pilot the project. DeCroo showed a PowerPoint presentation to give the group some visual examples of what the new "look and feel" signage will be. Karges added the Washington Office is also pushing for standardized web sites for NLCS lands (more of the same "look and feel").

The first priority is to replace major portal signs in each area. Portal signs will have an area-specific graphic across the top. DeCroo has sent photos of the Steens area to the Washington Office so they can work on the drawing for the CMPA – we should have input on design of the graphic throughout the process. For trailhead signs, the NLCS Sign Plan requires that any trail displayed on a map MUST have a trailhead sign. Currently, some of the CMPA trails are signed or have register boxes, but not all, and any new trails designated in the Steens Comprehensive Recreation Plan will need signs as well. DeCroo also showed a printed version of one of the signs so the SMAC could accurately relate the size of the new designs.

Dan Haak stated the SMAC has always pushed for minimal signage in the CMPA, and that we use brochures and other means to educate users. DeCroo recalled those conversations and added that eventually the NLCS Sign Plan is likely going to be spread to all BLM-administered lands. She has sent pictures to the Washington Office of what is currently on the ground in the CMPA and, despite the uniqueness of the area, the push is still for consistency across NLCS units. Interpretive panels are also included in the standardized feel. If we don't want to replace interpretive panels with the new design, we can remove them altogether – there is no requirement for interpretive panels to exist on the ground (like the requirement for trailhead signs). DeCroo reviewed accent color options for the signs and the SMAC agreed that the most "natural" looking color is the best – the BLM can decide whatever that may be.

The SMAC discussed some specifics about the trailhead signs and if/when/where to place them. Then each SMAC member discussed their initial thoughts about the Sign Plan overall:

David Bilyeu – against the idea of extensive signage at trailheads, but likes having the trailheads marked for the most part. It may be a good idea to have some kind of information at trailheads to educate users, but keep it discreet and mostly limited to a brochure or a handout. Bilyeu is in favor of replacing existing interpretive panels with the new design instead of not having anything on the ground.

Leon Pielstick – doesn't really support doing things that aren't necessary and we already have functional signs on the ground. Having signs at trailheads sometimes makes a user think the trail is "maintained" – there needs to be some clarification or some sort of warning/information that signals the trail is usable but not maintained.

Stacy Davies – inquired about the 'actual' difference between the existing signs and the new designs,

then stated overall he felt the National Sign Plan is symptomatic of what's really going on – everything is being standardized and the Steens is being recognized for its uniqueness, which was the exact intention of the Steens Act legislation. The SMAC fought for no designated trails, and now there are designated trails on the ground. The SMAC asked for minimal signage, and now the new mandate will put a sign at every trailhead. Davies is extremely frustrated and is going to ask Congressman Walden to fight these things as hard as he can; he will encourage him to pass legislation that takes the Steens out of the NLCS. There is no cooperation anymore and all the time invested into the development of the Steens legislation feels wasted. The Sign Plan is just a symptom of what is going on nationally and it isn't what he signed up for – he is very frustrated. If we are going to sign trails, Davies wants to sign every single one of them, and there are hundreds out there. If we are going to treat the Steens as a National Monument, then Davies is going to fight to protect people's uses for future generations. It is so frustrating that we can't have the Steens Act and be part of the NLCS all at the same time.

Mark Bagett – Agrees with Davies and putting the CMPA into the national template is not what the SMAC would like to see. Bagett much prefers a weathered and rustic look over the modern design. He understands the national mandate but supports the SMAC exercising every opportunity to have any signage blend into the landscape – natural colors, as small as possible, as simple as possible, etc. In addition, if signs are on trailheads, there needs to be information available about the condition of the trail.

Fred Otley – Agrees with Davies and feels that if anything is going to be signed, EVERYTHING should be signed – roads, trails, etc.

Dan Haak – concern with the fact that we have to get Washington Office approval for things as simple as signage in a very unique area. Haak inquired about how the SMAC can find a unique and well-thought solution to challenge something that is “mandated.” Haak would hate to see the basic structure for the portal signs go away.

Karges stated she has had several conversations with the Washington Office about the uniqueness of our area and how it really is quite different from other NLCS units and that it has been difficult to get that point across or accepted.

Tara Martinak stated there were a few things the SMAC could make a recommendation or suggestion on regarding the sign plan if they so choose:

- Trailhead information signs? Brochures at trail registers?
- Artwork for portal signs
- Accent color for signs
- Replace interpretive panels or remove them

Bilyeu stated the spirit of the Steens is compromised with these kind of mandates and he is leaning more toward what Davies said about the Sign Plan being a symptom of a bigger problem. Martinak reminded the group, regarding trailheads, there would not be a significant change *on the ground*. The visual will be different, but there are already trailhead signs on many trails in the area. Davies asked if we were going to change or add to trail maintenance with the “designation” of more trails in the Comprehensive Recreation Plan and with the new signage – if trails are signed, they should be maintained. Eric Haakenson stated additional maintenance does not come with the signage, though we do periodic maintenance as we can. Haak stated that no matter what, it seems like the group isn't buying into the whole process at all and really doesn't want to make any recommendation on the Sign Plan – even a small buy in looks like the SMAC “approves” or “agrees” with the idea, and we really don't.

## **COMPREHENSIVE RECREATION PLAN – OBSUCRE ROUTES/ANALYSIS**

Rhonda Karges reviewed the Comprehensive Recreation Plan (CRP) and its re-release in mid-January 2015. The CRP Environmental Assessment (EA) was first released in March 2014, then, on September 30, 2014, the Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) reversed their earlier decision regarding Obscure routes designated in the Steens Mountain Travel Management Plan in 2007 and found that "with regard to our previous reversal of BLM's decision to designate Obscure routes as open to motorized travel, we now vacate our prior reversal and affirm BLM's designation of all of the Obscure routes as open to motorized travel" (185 IBLA at 63-64). To comply with the NEPA regarding IBLA's September decision, BLM further reviewed transportation and recreation planning through CRP EA. Under the No Action Alternative obscure routes (33 segments, totally approximately 36 miles) are now considered open and analyzed as the existing condition. Sub-alternative B analyzes permanent closure of some obscure routes, some administrative use only routes, and one All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) route. Also within Sub-alternative B, a reroute of Little Blitzen Trailhead and roads existing prior to 2000 are being analyzed and added into the transportation system. The remaining alternatives consider all obscure routes as closed.

Each and every obscure route was re-reviewed and analyzed on the ground and had a route analysis form completed for the updated CRP. The SMAC received copies of each route analysis and paged through them as Karges provided the background for the discussion. Basically, if the BLM could identify the road/way on the ground and could identify a need or use for the road/way, it was left open. Davies stated this was the first time he had seen the analysis forms and would like some time to go through them individually. The conversation turned to road maintenance and both Davies and Otley emphasized that some of the roads aren't visible on the ground or as well "visibly used" because they were not maintained as they should have been. There is a huge need to understand, recognize and accept the historical uses of roads in the area. Otley reminded the Council of the intensive process they went through previously to identify roads on the Steens and their historical uses, and the SMACs development of maintenance level intensities.

There was quite a bit of discussion back and forth about particular routes, maintenance needs, administrative uses, safety concerns, recreation access potential, etc. Otley stated that "redundant" is not an acceptable argument for closing a road. Karges stated the BLM talked with landowners, permittees, Back Country Horsemen, OHV advocates, interested public and the Harney County Court throughout analysis to get the broadest opinion of road uses/existence possible and felt the BLM had done a very good job reviewing actual conditions. Bagett had concerns about obscure route 3 and whether or not the closure would eliminate some public recreation access to the Blitzen River.

Davies separated the route analysis forms into "closed" and "open/administrative" and was frustrated that the "closed" pile was much larger than the other. He wasn't sure he could have a productive conversation because it really felt like the BLM didn't care one way or the other if the public had access. Once a road is closed or even left open for only "administrative use," it will disappear quickly. Davies does not support closures or administrative use only. It seems like we just keep re-fighting this same fight; having this same conversation over and over. Bagett felt he would have a hard time making recommendations on specific routes without putting boots on the ground.

Davies had a concern about **obscure route 25 and felt it was a mistake to close this one**. Karges clarified that this route is closed because you cannot access it anymore due to another road closure done through the Burnt Car Road litigation –route 25 isn't even reachable. Davies stated it seemed the agency had their mind made up about the closures, but that he was trying to get some additional rationale on some of the route analyses. For the **route designated for ATV-use only**, Davies felt it should be open for all motorized use – essentially just "open" for public use. Davies and Haak both stated their **opposition to any administrative use only route** – if anyone is using it, it should be open to everyone. David Bilyeu stated it made sense to close unneeded or redundant roads, especially those that can't be located on the

ground.

Cecil Dick asked for clarification on “administrative use.” Karges stated it could be used by the BLM, a contractor, a landowner or permittee, etc. Tribal access is authorized differently under the Steens Mountain Travel Management Plan. Cecil didn’t feel he could comment any further until he was able to speak with the Tribe and gather more information. Overall, he felt that decisions should be made that would support and benefit the community. Otley reminded the SMAC that they need to think of potential future uses and needs as well and not just evaluate things based on the current situation. Otley does not support any limitations on access. Bilyeu still supports the idea of administrative use.

Davies asked what is the purpose of closing these roads? Why is this so important when there are so few of them on the landscape? What is the impetus? What are they hurting? In response, Bilyeu talked about maintaining wilderness character and Karges shared BLM’s mission to be a good steward of the land.

**PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD:**

Dan Morse, Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA): Pertaining to the CRP, ONDA will certainly have some input into the proposed road closures and roads left open/for administrative use. ONDA is disappointed with the short comment period provided on the re-release of the CRP. The process on the CRP and the additional information brought forward in sub-alternative B...ONDA is very concerned that the BLM is moving ahead with inclusion of the obscure routes. Morse would describe it as “hasty and ill-advised” because there is a very real and outstanding questions as to whether the obscure routes are lawful, and that question remains in litigation. Just because the IBLA made a ruling doesn’t mean it is over – the District Court has jurisdiction here and it will be some time before they make a decision. Regardless of that process, it is possible that all of this effort by BLM could be for not... the CRP EA would then have to change. If implementation were moving forward, it would have to be reversed. It seems this is a risk in terms of time, effort and money. The ONDA wanted to make sure the BLM and the SMAC were aware of this particular concern.

Davies asked Morse about the ONDA’s overall feelings about the CRP – Morse felt it was fairly balanced, with some very strong concerns regarding some issues/proposals, and some areas where ONDA was supportive/in agreement with BLM. Davies then asked Morse about the ONDA’s opinion regarding the NLCS Sign Plan and the vegetative response to wildfire and the FIAT. Morse didn’t have any information to add to those conversations in particular, but did feel surprise that the FIAT was putting out an EA.

**COMPREHENSIVE RECREATION PLAN (continued...)**

Otley stated we are treating the obscure routes as “one point in time.” It isn’t fair to do that because public use cycles and fluctuates relative to a bunch of things over time. Historical use should never be shut out because it fluctuates. Technology changes over time as well, so that may contribute to the cyclical nature of road use. Management needs, legal requirements, etc. all contribute to the fluctuation of use – so the “one point in time” perspective of road condition or existence isn’t right or fair. Karges reiterated that if an existing use or need for a road could not be identified, or even a historical use, the road was proposed for closure. Davies tried to refocus the group and figure out if there was any common ground for a recommendation.

Dan Haak suggested the beginning of a potential SMAC recommendation with “administrative access should only be utilized when there is a specific reason for the access.” Unless there is a specific reason (like for a “privileged few”), there should be no administrative use. Pretty much everything should be open or closed. Administrative is unique and limited.

Discussion continued about open vs. closed vs. administrative use routes. Eric Haakenson reviewed the mileage for these types of designations and gave a few more clarifications on why decisions were made for certain routes. Cecil Dick wanted to know that if a road is closed, would it ever be reopened? Karges stated it will mostly likely never be reopened, but with really good justification and a solid NEPA analysis, there is a small percentage it could happen.

Davies stated that after thoroughly evaluating the obscure route proposals, he supports the BLM's decisions as presented, except for:

- 29 – open instead of administrative
- 25 – administrative use only
- 23 – administrative use only

Otley and Cecil Dick both wanted to consult more with their constituents before making any official recommendations on the routes. **Haak stated a non-formal recommendation as “take the roundtable discussion at face value and let the BLM use the information they gathered there to act on it as they choose.”** Members will work with their constituents and provide public comments through the NEPA process if they have additional input. The “motion” was seconded by Leon Pielstick. No discussion. Karges felt very pleased with the conversation and thanked the SMAC for their open-mindedness and willingness to tackle the subject.

### **MISCELLANEOUS**

The SMAC discussed the day's agenda items and summarized any action items to wrap up previous conversations. It was agreed the SMAC would like an update on the modified recommendation regarding post-fire vegetation recovery monitoring data (further design and funding of how to put all the data together that currently exists) and that each SMAC member should be working on this on their own, in between meetings... creative thinking and researching your network. A report at the next meeting on this effort is expected. Otley expressed the importance of having photos with the monitoring data and in the “report.”

Davies sent some pictures to Tara Martinak to show on a projector screen to emphasize monitoring photos and their value. Davies has been taking photos on Roaring Springs Ranch and feels they can really tell a story of vegetative response to fire. Monitoring is so important, and the use of monitoring data after it is gathered is equally valuable. Karges is still concerned with “who” is going to collect and report on all that data for the post-fire vegetation response effort the SMAC would like to see.

### **JANUARY 30, 2015**

Tara Martinak opened the meeting with an overview of the day's agenda and reminded everyone to sign in on the official attendance roster. Those in attendance introduced themselves before moving into the agenda.

### **PREVIOUS DAY'S RECAP**

Leon Pielstick asked for clarification on the designations within the obscure routes – Karges specified there are 1.95 miles of regular use/access roads; 13.4 miles of ways (routes in Wilderness Study Area); 7.36 miles of administrative use only routes; 1.09 miles of ATV use routes; and, 3.01 miles of road added (newly discovered during inventory of Obscure routes). Thirty-six miles were initially proposed for closure. Dan Haak asked if adding the additional 3.01 miles of “new routes” is going to create trouble with adversaries. Karges stated the BLM did a comprehensive look at the entire area and including the 3.01 miles of “new” routes was necessary for the process.

Jarod Lemos, Fisheries/Riparian Biologist for the Andrews/Steens Resource Area introduced himself and gave a brief summary of his upbringing, education and previous work experience. Karges added

high praise for Lemos and his work with the BLM. The SMAC asked him a few questions as well, such as the role/process of the FIAT, which led to a small discussion on Sage grouse, firefighting priorities, strategies, modeling, satellite imagery, etc. within different agencies and how they are all going to integrate in the future. Cecil Dick asked about the Tri-State Fuels Project between Oregon, Idaho and Nevada and if Lemos had any knowledge about it. Lemos had limited information about the Project but did think it was similar to the work of the FIAT but more fire-specific with the goals of smaller fires, more controlled burning, etc. **Cecil asked for a bit more information on the Tri-State Fuels Project at the next meeting.** Tara Martinak reminded the SMAC that the Project is actually being presented and vetted through the Southeast Oregon Resource Advisory Council, so there was likely information already available and could be passed along to the SMAC.

Davies asked what are the conditions of fish/riparian areas in the Andrews Resource Area? Lemos started with the BLM late in the fall and hasn't physically been able to get out to many sites on the ground, but he is working on a priority list and developing a monitoring schedule and will get out to evaluate conditions as soon as the weather/access allows. Conversation continued about the value of healthy streams and riparian systems; juniper encroachment issues; vegetation placement in areas where it might not currently be to help maintain riparian systems; riparian integration with other resources/uses, etc. The SMAC thanked Jarod for his introduction and stated they look forward to working with him in the future.

#### **REVIEW/APPROVE JUNE AND NOVEMBER 2014 MEETING MINUTES**

David Bilyeu suggested a word processing correction on page 5, second paragraph, "after some discussion for clarification (including what a fire break should look *like*)..." Leon Pielstick motioned to approve the November 2014 meeting minutes; seconded by Bilyeu...no discussion or objection. Approved unanimously.

#### **CHAIR/VICE CHAIR ELECTIONS**

Bilyeu nominated Leon Pielstick for Chairperson; seconded by Cecil Dick. Pielstick accepted/no discussion or objection. Pielstick nominated Mark Bagett for Vice Chairperson; seconded by Bilyeu. Bagett accepted/no discussion or objection.

#### **MEMBERSHIP STATUS/APPOINTMENT UPDATES**

Tara Martinak shared an update on current membership status – the Wild Horse and Burro and Dispersed Recreation positions will be up for advertisement in the next two weeks...watch for those and hopefully reapply! We are still waiting for appointment/reappointment on six positions – No Financial Interest, Local Environmental Representative, Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation, Grazing Permittee (2), and State Liaison. The group discussed the length of the nomination and appointment process and encouraged each other/the SMAC/Chairperson/Vice Chairperson to "urge" those responsible in making the final appointments in a timely manner.

Davies stated this issue is a symptom of a bigger issue: that the SMAC and Advisory Councils aren't important/a priority and that could be because they are no longer effective. Karges stated there have been troubles with the timeliness of the process since its inception, despite the SMAC going through significant productive periods.

Bilyeu stated he will commit to making more of an effort to advertising vacancies on the SMAC when they come open for nomination. Davies stated people will engage if they feel like they are making a difference; now we are hampered more by litigation, recommendations not being followed, etc., so people may shy away from participating. Karges referred to all of the accomplishments the SMAC has reached so far and that we are currently in a slower planning/implementation period, which could contribute to the group not feeling as purposeful as once before.

## **RECAP OF THURSDAY'S DISCUSSION**

Bagett wanted to talk about the obscure routes discussion, on one road in particular – would definitely feel more comfortable **leaving OR-3 open for public use** (even though you can't find it on the ground) because it does provide an access route for recreation. It goes from Three Springs Road directly east to the River (about half way from the Loop Road to Tabor Cabin). Davies stated the road ends at the fence in that area, which is the Wilderness boundary. There was a bit of discussion about the road, its historic use (mainly access for salting livestock) and whether or not it could provide useful access for recreationists now or in the future. Bagett suggested if it doesn't change anything on the ground, perhaps leaving it open is the best bet. Closing it now closes it forever – no going back. Bilyeu wondered if there were any invasive species in the area where travel from existing roads down OR-3 could spread invasives. Davies stated there aren't any currently, but at some point there sure could be.

Karges stated if she knew there was historic use or existing use/need on the road, it would be an easier decision on whether or not to leave OR-3 open or closed. The road doesn't really exist on the ground, which makes it hard to show as 'open.' Often when people see a road on a map, they will drive all over the place trying to find it... potentially causing significant disturbance. Bilyeu felt strongly **OR-3 should be closed** because there is no serious loss of recreational opportunity without it.

NLCS Sign Plan – Bilyeu suggested the group make a statement: our concern is that the standardization affects the vision of the SMAC and how the Steens' Act is interpreted. These small things (like the Sign Plan) really need to be given consideration and notice how these intrusions can affect the work ahead for the SMAC. The standardization limits what can be done with signs on Steens Mountain, and how the Council has historically dealt with signage there. Bilyeu shared a draft recommendation letter he wrote for the Council's review. After some discussion, Karges summarized that it doesn't seem the SMAC isn't – at this point – concerned with the sign designs or the materials or their placement, but the overall concept of the CMPA being lumped into the standardization of NLCS lands across the west...when really, the CMPA is managed under a very unique, one of a kind, piece of legislation. Again, a symptom of a bigger problem – the standardization for areas that are *not* standard or meant to be part of "the mold." Davies reviewed some of the old decisions from previous SMAC sign committees – no-reflection materials, most natural looking color scheme, non-intrusive, etc. Bilyeu stated he would be more in favor of removing signs altogether than replacing them with the "new standard."

Haak motioned to accept – with minor word-smithing – Bilyeu's proposed letter. Davies seconded the motion. Discussion: Martinak suggested adding information about the local culture, history of the SMAC and their previous discussions on signage, etc. Davies added he would like to articulate the uniqueness of the Steens and that the NLCS original legislation recognized the variety of lands it was going to encompass and didn't encourage homogenization; also the cost of the signs, when we already have good signs in place, is unnecessary; local culture/promoting the Steens as a land of discovery. The primary purpose should be front and center – that the Steens is unique and should not be standardized with other NLCS units. Otley agreed and supports the concept of the letter as proposed and discussed. **Bilyeu will revamp the letter and send it out over email for approval and processing. The letter should be addressed to the OR/WA BLM State Director, and copied to local Congressional representatives and the SMAC Designated Federal Official.** The motion passed unanimously.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Davies addressed the SMAC as a member of the public: the public policies have had a huge effect on our county. In 1990 there were 320+ students at Burns High School and today there is half of that. This is primarily driven by government policy decisions and the inability to use our natural resources. The only way that will change is if the citizens of the county work hard at finding solutions to these barriers – sustainability has three legs...environment, economics, and people. The "environment" has ruled the

decision making for many years and we need to be more inclusive with the importance of economics and people as well. Davies will continue to push this theme and, as a member of the public, encourages the SMAC to be the leader on the creative thinking and problem solving and try to revive Harney County socially and economically. Every decision made has an economic and social impact and the SMAC can influence those decisions.

Davies fears that the livestock population will be half of what it is today because of sage grouse. There are 500,000 beef cows (non-dairy) in the state of Oregon; half of them spend half of their life on public land. Public land grazing has reduced significantly over the last decade, which continues to have a negative ripple effect. Karges clarified that it has been identified that grazing has been proven to not be a major threat to sage grouse habitat and populations. Davies agreed, but stated that those ready to litigate decisions regarding Sage grouse think the opposite – that grazing does negatively impact Sage grouse and is the number one threat. The group discussed some of the socio-economics and the difficulty in analyzing them in a NEPA document. Karges encouraged grazing permittees to share any numbers or this type of information with their Rangeland Management Specialist.

Cecil Dick stated he didn't see much from the County Court and their interest for development in the area. People seem to be satisfied with our population and not interested in expansion. At this time, all we are doing is maintaining the status quo.

#### **DESIGNATED FEDERAL OFFICIAL UPDATE (Rhonda Karges)**

- Still working with Stroemple on a fence issue, but have reached a settlement.
- Travel management plan – on December 18, ONDA filed an amended complaint. The litigation process, back and forth, continues.
- North Steens Ecosystem Restoration Project – This litigation process continues as well. IBLA ruled in BLM's favor (regarding machine piling in Wilderness Study Area), however, ONDA will appeal this decision to District Court.
- North Steens Transmission Line – Litigation continues; BLM's reply briefing is due soon.
- South Steens Herd Management Area Population Management Plan EA was posted online earlier this week. The SMAC was encouraged to look over the document.
- Wildland fire rehabilitation – Bone Creek Basin (aerial seed 4,000 acres; ground-treat weeds; construct erosion control with rocks in the creek; create road and trail water diversions/hardened water crossings; plant bitterbrush seed; plant cottonwood trees and willows; monitoring; potentially some livestock grazing rest in cooperation with landowner/permittee; all of the work will be analyzed/authorized through and ESR Categorical Exclusion; Blitzen Crossing fire (no rehabilitation work here); House Creek fire (520 acres of aerial seeding)
- Vegetation Management EA – draft out for public comment in early April, with a Decision Record in early June. The purpose of the EA is basically to expand the allowable use of herbicides on public lands.
- Page Springs Weir – Solicitors visited the site and have provided comments into the EA. Our Water Rights Specialist is restructuring the document and is looking for an internal review in April. **This could potentially be on the June SMAC meeting agenda.**
- Andrews Resource Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCA) – 13 permittees have applied for CCAs across 28 allotments across 873,901 PPH and PGS acres.
- Sage grouse RMP amendments process – ID Team is incorporating internal and public comments and putting public research into a proposed plan...Proposed plan/final EIS published in late spring 2015 with a record of decision in late summer or early fall of 2015.
- Campbell Inholder Access EA – in progress; the proposed action is designed from the proponent's input, however, the BLM needs more information before moving forward.
- Working a Right of Way application and easement exchange with Home Ranch, LLC. A scoping letter will go out to the public soon.

- Working on an exchange easement with George Stroemple as well.

The SMAC has a letter from Tom Davis Livestock in their packet. Bilyeu asked about the details and Karges is currently in the process of responding to the letter. There is a difference in opinion about the circumstances and hopefully more conversation will remedy the situation.

### **MEMBER ROUNDTABLE**

Leon Pielstick – suggested using the South Steens wild horse herd for a new and unique pilot project for population management; not sure of the details on what the project would look like, but perhaps using the Steens legislation will allow for some creative management of that herd.

David Bilyeu – constituents remain interested in Sage grouse and fire policy and all the work going on at the various levels within the agencies.

### **REVIEW FOLLOW UP ITEMS AND DEVELOP AGENDA FOR THE NEXT MEETING**

Future agenda/DFO topics:

- RMPA update/Sage grouse (Rhonda Karges, DFO update)
- Collaborative Processes (Pam Hardy to lead)
- Brainstorm: how can the SMAC move forward with creative solutions to implement the Steens Act as it was originally intended? (Stacy Davies suggestion/lead)
- Page Springs Weir update (Rhonda Karges, DFO update)
- Juniper development and marketing opportunities – get information and provide to SMAC
- Update on the FIAT
- Update on the modified recommendation regarding post-fire vegetation recovery monitoring data; further design and funding of how to put all the data together that currently exists – what have people developed or thought of on their own, in between meetings?
- NLCS sign plan update
- Tri State Fuels project update
- Wild horses?

### **MISCELLANEOUS**

Karl Findling, who applied for the SMAC in the Mechanized and Consumptive Recreation position, attended the last portion of the meeting and introduced himself to the group. Findling has spent a significant amount of time on the Steens and has a very high interest in being on the Council. The group thanked Findling for applying and looked forward to working with him in the future.

Karges asked if the SMAC wanted BLM presence at their after-meeting dinner(s). The SMAC agreed and felt the unofficial get-togethers were more of a social gathering and all are welcome to attend. The informal, friendly interactions are important and valuable to the group dynamic, which certainly includes the BLM.

The meeting adjourned around 11:30 a.m.

A full digital recording of this meeting is available upon request at the Burns District office.

The Steens Mountain Advisory Council approved these minutes on May 1, 2014.

Signed by Leon Pielstick, SMAC Chair:

