

Southeast Oregon Resource Advisory Council Meeting

October 10, 2019

Meeting convened at 8 a.m. at Harney County Community Center, 478 N. Broadway, Burns, Ore.

Members present: Jason Kesling, Mark Owens, Jeremy Austin, Stan Shepardson, Tim Davis, Richard Watts, Don Hodge, Ken Poole

Agency Reps and others: Todd Forbes, Lakeview District Manager; Jeff Rose, Burns BLM District Manager and Designated Federal Official; Don Gonzalez, Vale BLM District Manager; Larisa Bogardus, Vale BLM PAO; Brent Grasty, Vale BLM Planner

Public: Susie Koppert, rock hound; Michael O'Casey, JT? AH?

NOTE: Due to the lack of a quorum, the RAC could discuss items on the agenda, but could not vote on them.

District Updates

Vale BLM has begun scoping for the Louse Canyon Geographic Management Area Environmental Impact Statement. The area is comprised of five grazing allotments (536,434 acres) in Malheur County and two grazing allotments (11,262 acres) in Humboldt County, Nevada. The EIS will analyze alternative livestock management and restoration actions that would promote a landscape health while providing continued opportunities for public land grazing.

Michael O'Casey asked for an update on the Wyden/Owyhee bill. He has worked with the senator's staff to provide information about existing conditions and constraints. This has potential to be one of the biggest land management decisions in this part of the country.

Don Gonzalez said almost all of the district's conversations with Sen. Wyden and his staff have covered information previously discussed by the RAC.

Lakeview BLM is conducting Section 106 consultations for the Tucker Hill mining expansion environmental impact statement. Once complete, DOI leadership will be briefed and the Record of Decision will be finalized.

The Beaty Butte Wild Horse Training Facility reported a 100% adoption rate. The Beaty Butte Wild Horse and Burro management plan is close to being signed.

Burns BLM is working with the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative on a fuels treatment pilot project in the Pueblo Mountains. This area has been called "the last of the best" sage-grouse habitat.

In FY19, 371 wild horses were adopted from the corrals, and 195 compliance checks were conducted.

Lakeview Resource Management Plan Amendment

The draft EIS has been reviewed by the state office and was returned to the district for edits. Six alternatives were analyzed, 5 of which are virtually identical to Vale's (Southeastern Oregon RMPA). The formal draft environmental impact statement could be published in early January.

Most resource management plans look at whether or not to weigh wilderness values equally with other values when making management decisions, or whether or not to elevate wilderness values above others. In this case, “No Action” calls for follow the original resource management plan as amended by the sage-grouse plan. Four alternatives address variations in the amount of Wilderness to be managed in three categories. The sixth represents the RAC’s recommendations were included in a separate alternative.

Southeastern Oregon Resource Management Plan Amendment

Staff are in the process of reviewing and analyzing 1200 substantive comments from about 150 submissions. They will then develop draft responses, which will be shared with the state office and solicitors before the final EIS is issued for public review.

The hope is to release the FEIS in March, with the Record of Decision to be signed this summer.

Some organizations are able to hire consultants, or have professional staff to review documents, but the general public does not have that luxury, Jeremy Austin noted. He suggested a longer comment periods to give all publics the chance to review and craft meaningful comments.

Jeff Rose said that districts do look and consider all comments submitted regarding analyses. If 40,000 people are opposed to an action, that needs to be considered. People might support an alternative because the outcome improves habitat, even though that wasn’t analyzed.

Fire and Fuels

- **2019 Fire Season**

Burns -- The Pacific Northwest had quite a season for the first time in 3 or 4 years. Burns District had 60 fires, which damaged about 2,000 acres. Most significant lightning storms brought rain, which helped reduce the number of starts. Pile burning has begun, with about 10,000 acres of work planned. There are concerns about the grass load and potential for fires next season.

A new smoke camera is expected to be installed on Riddle Mountain in Harney County before next year’s fire season, which should help with initial attack. Vale fire personnel were able to identify several fires from smoke cameras in Malheur County this summer.

Starting the end of next year, Oregon BLM will not renew a longstanding assistance agreement with Oregon Department of Forestry, as it is not cost effective. Last year, for example, only 53,000 acres burned on Lakeview BLM, but the district paid the state \$2 million for personnel and engines.

In the past, Oregon BLM paid about \$10 million a year to the state large fire fund along with other owners of ODF protected lands. Two years ago, ODF dropped the agency from the fund to avoid losing its wildfire insurance policy as a result of the enormous cost of fire suppression, including those on public lands.

This year, Lakeview sustained fire damage on only 3,000 acres, although one fire did cross onto the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife Refuge, which is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, where it burned an additional 21,500 acres.

Mark Owens asked about fuel treatment options for the refuge. Planning is in the works for joint emergency stabilization and restoration, Todd Forbes said. The area will be treated with imazapic to prevent invasive weeds from germinating, then seeded with native grasses.

Vale BLM responded to 45 ignitions this season totaling less than 5,000 acres – well below the 10-year average of 72,000 acres. A quarter of this year's fires were human caused, although those were extinguished more quickly and damaged only about 50 acres.

Activity at the Ontario Single Engine Air Tanker (SEAT) Base was also quiet. This allowed for improvements to the runoff containment system, which overflowed after significant rainfall. A new retardant system was installed as well, enabling planes to reload in just 3 minutes.

Tomorrow, the 45-day comment period will begin for the Tri-State Fuels Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Is this different from the Great Basin Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement? Yes, work began on this several years ago. The GBEIS will allow for faster development of these types of documents in the future.

- **Update on TriState Fuels Breaks**

The Tri-State project calls for using various vegetation management strategies to create a network of fuel breaks in Idaho and Malheur County, linking to an existing system in northeastern Nevada. Alternative 2, the preferred alternative, would allow the maximum number of fuel breaks, primarily centered on roads or along boundaries separating types of land use activities. A seemingly simple component is roadway maintenance, which can significantly reduce response times. Breaks will not be built near areas designated as Wilderness.

What will this cost? It's a 10-year implementation plan, at a cost of about \$500,000 per year, including annual maintenance and mowing. This is very cheap compared to the cost of rehabilitation. For example, rehabilitation after the 64,000 acre Soda Mountain Fire averaged \$1,000 per acre -- a total of \$64 million. It also allows for targeted grazing along rights-of-way.

It's important to keep in mind that fire breaks do not stop fires, but they do slow fire spread, allowing for firefighting resources time to respond, Todd Forbes said. For example, retardant drops are more effective when used along established fuel breaks than applied to dry vegetation. The objective is to prepare the landscape before a fire starts.

Michael O'Casey expressed concern that the preferred alternative is too aggressive. Don Gonzalez said it allows more flexibility, not necessarily more extensive treatment. Land managers must still strike a balance, including coordinating with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, which must agree to any work that affects the wildlife under its care, including sage-grouse.

How involved has Vale been in the plan's development? The district dedicated a botanist and planner to review all the plan specifications so they would be better able to answer questions and respond to comments.

11:15 a.m. Time for public comment and response

None.

Rangeland and Grazing

Outcome-based grazing is a new tool in rangeland management. It identifies rangeland condition goals and plans to accomplish them.

After a cool, wet season, the greatest risk of wildfire is seen in subsequent years, due to the increased buildup of residual fuel that remains standing without snowpack to push it down, which allows fire to spread very quickly. Thus, it is important to reduce or remove these fuels.

Spring grazing is the most effective time to for cheatgrass reduction, while falls is the best time for removing residual fuels on the ground. The challenge in the past has been to identify the risk in time for ranchers to respond to the need, as it could take up to a year to make changes to a grazing permit. Mowing can encourage cheatgrass unless an area is treated with an herbicide at the same time.

The Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center will be doing the monitoring for an independent evaluation, and will help with the design of the project.

11:15 a.m. Time for public comment and response

Timber

- Discussion of Good Neighbor Authority

Update on Grassy Mountain/Calico mining proposal

Don Gonzalez reported the state will not process the proposal until it receives payment. Meanwhile, a contractor is working on the economic feasibility study, which should be finished next summer. Drill testing is complete.

BLM will coordinate with the state to jointly bond the project. A cost-reimbursable agreement is in place for the environmental impact study, which will include evaluation of power transmission to the site. There is some concern about potential effects on the aquifer/water table. The site is not in sage-grouse habitat, so that is not a factor.

Wild Horses and Burros

Burns Supervisory Wild Horse & Burro Specialist Rob Sharp reported there has been good success with the German Mustang Makeover program and U.S. 4-H programs, the Beaty Butte Wild Horse Training Facility and others.

Overall, it was a good year for the Oregon WHB program, because there was no need to provide supplemental water for horses on the range.

No gathers have been scheduled for calendar year 2020, but not because there is no need. In particular, Lakeview's Paisley Herd Management Area's population is up to 800 head, more than four times the appropriate management level of 60-150.

The Forest Service is scoping for a management plan for the Murderers Creek Herd Management Area, which is split 75/25 percent between Forest Service and BLM-managed lands. Other population control efforts, like Vale's fertility inhibitor darting program, have helped as well.

- **Update on Vale darting program**

Vale Wild Horse and Burro Specialist and Eric Youngberg of High Desert Strategies, a private non-profit partner in the project, presented.

In 2017, conditions were such that wild horses on the Cold Springs Herd Management Area negatively impacted sage-grouse, making quick action very necessary.

The herd came in for water at night about 30 percent of the time, making it very hard to distinguish individual horses. With help from Youngberg and two other volunteers, Rockefeller was able to dart half the mares with a fertility inhibitor over the course of 10 days in 2018.

They quickly realized that an effective darting program would require paying people for their time invested in monitoring bands as well as actively darting, as well expenses associated with the work. This would also help limit turnover and the need to educate and train new volunteers.

In 2019, Youngberg and other local ranchers approached Vale BLM with a proposal to form the non-profit. BLM funded outfitting a horse trailer as a mobile office with chargers, satellite phones, computers, dart guns, night scopes, and other necessities to conduct operations far from the grid.

That year, seven people, including volunteers, employees of the non-profit and Rockefeller, darted 14 of 15 mares in seven days on the Hog Creek Herd Management Area. Subsequently, eight people darted 26 of the 33 mares on the Cold Springs HMA. Another seven were darted in three days this fall before the operation was rained out.

Gonacon, the fertility inhibitor used, is effective for 1-3 years after one dose, and 2-5 years if a second dose is received. Compared to the cost of helicopter gathering excess horses on the two HMAs, darting will save the district \$100,000 a year over 10 years.

Stan Shepardson asked how often darting will need to occur. We are still working on that. We will need to allow some mares to remain fertile to replace horses that die off naturally. Nationally, that's 5- 10 percent of horses on the range. Current costs are about \$1,000 per mare, but that will drop as fewer mares need to be darted each year.

On-range reproduction is the root cause of herd overpopulation, Rob Sharp noted. Left unmanaged, a herd's population doubles every 4 years. The agency is exploring darting, spaying and direct injection of fertility inhibitors to gathered horses to slow that rate.

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Lakeview's Paisley Herd Management Area's population is up to 800 head, more than four times the appropriate management level of 60-150. The Forest Service is scoping for a management plan for the Murderers Creek Herd Management Area.

Wrap-up

Stan Shepardson said he was interested in economic impacts of special use permits and public lands. He suggested a discussion of the permitting process at a future meeting.

Election of officers to take place at the February 2020 meeting. Lakeview RMPA should be ready for comment by then, and the RAC will finalize its comments at the April meeting.