

Notes

John Day-Snake Resource Advisory Council Meeting

Thursday-Friday, June 22-23, 2023

Attendance:

RAC members Jerry Brummer (Zoom), Shay White, Tom Mottl, Jim Reiss, Mary Fleischmann, Steve Lent, Susie Koppert, Terry Drever Gee, and Katy Nelson.

Agency representatives: Acting Designated Federal Official Joe Aragon, Vale BLM; Prineville District Manager Amanda Roberts; and David Plummer, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; Chase Bloom, Malheur National Forest (Zoom), Clayton Collins, Umatilla National Forest (Zoom), Ochoco Deschutes National Forest and Crooked River Grasslands, Kaitlyn Webb (Zoom)

Agency staff: Larisa Bogardus, Vale PAO/RAC coordinator; Vale Baker Field Office Assistant Field Manager Sandy Tennyson; and National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center Project Manager Sarah Sherman.

Public: TJ Barbour

The meeting convened at 9 a.m. Thursday, June 22. Shay White served as chair.

Minutes: Notes from the February 2023 meeting were approved.

Designated Federal Official Report/Agency Updates

Vale District BLM (attached)

Prineville District BLM (attached)

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (attached) – Shay White asked about the Saddle Creek blowout, which has created very different access. What will the Forest do with the bridge at Sheep Creek? Would it be possible to lease the site? Plummer said two bridges have been replaced at Kirkwood Ranch and the Forest would probably do something similar at Sheep Creek, use the old bridge as staging during construction of the new bridge. There may be potential for alternate uses. Jim Reiss asked how high up the work is on the Middle Upper Grande Ronde project. Plummer said it's around Minam.

Deschutes National Forest (attached) – Steve Lent asked about the Cabin Lake Ranger Station. KaitlynWebb said she would find out.

Mary Fleischmann asked what “enforce regulations within our existing authorities” meant in terms of the long-term occupancy of China Hat. The Forest does not have trespass authority after the 14-day limit it can only cite and go to court for a ruling.

Amanda Roberts added Oregon has very strict eviction laws that also apply to public lands and the tools for public land managers are extremely limited. This is becoming a huge problem in urban interface areas. Dispersal is generally achieved by addressing hazardous materials related to human waste, illegal dumping and illegal activity. It drains resources with a limited budget. Cross-deputizing with local sheriff's offices has helped. Unfortunately, housing is a statewide, multijurisdictional issue. Federal seasonal workers struggle to find affordable housing.

Does the Forest Service or BLM receive additional funding to help? Is there anything the RAC can do? The problem is identifying the root of the problem – is it recreation? Resources? Hazmat? And how does it fit into the multiple-use mandate?

At minimum, funding is needed to remove abandoned vehicles and trash. Roberts encouraged the RAC to support federal pay increases for urban areas or provide seasonal housing.

Is the government funding seasonal housing? Prineville is in the process of developing fire station quarters, but completion is 5 to 7 years out. In some cases, the district has privately contracted seasonal housing.

Terry Drever Gee said a lot of housing has been lost to the Airbnb industry, which is exempt from eviction laws. It's going to take a village – cooperation, collaboration and leveraging funding resources. Plummer said federal agencies are not able to interact with elected officials and encouraged RAC members to initiate those conversations. Another challenge is it costs the federal government 3 to 4 times as much to build housing vs. private enterprise. For example, a 10-person bunkhouse would cost the Forest \$2 million to build. The entire USDA Forest Service budget for employee housing is \$30 million.

Malheur National Forest -- Chase Bloom gave a verbal report. Scoping for the Murderers Creek Wild Horse Joint Management Area (MNF and BLM Oregon-Washington) closed June 9. Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) funds are being used to replace bridges and picnic tables at various sites. The forest has faced some challenges with turnover in recreation and leadership. The Final environmental assessment for the Emigrant Creek Aspen Project is out for review. The Forest is participating in the Mt. Adams Institute program to help veterans transition into civilian federal careers.

Several large vegetation projects are in the works around Austin Junction and Upper Bear Lake. Efforts continue to get the biomass cogeneration plant up and running. Staff are working with the State Historic Preservation Office to utilize the Civilian Conservation Corps-era Camp Canyon Creek compound in John Day.

Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River Grassland (attached) – Recent snowfall has postponed prescriptive fire operations. GAOA-funded cattle guard replacement and paving of Forest Road 42 is continuing.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy has been expanded to include the Grasslands, especially along the Crooked River, to allow a more holistic approach. Under the Good Neighbor Authority, the

Forest is working with Oregon Department of Forestry to do evaluations. This will be a 10-year project.

The proposed Lemon Gulch Trails Final Environmental Impact Statement was removed from consideration without a decision. The forest was directed to conduct additional community engagement to address the controversial non-motorized trail use issue.

Tomorrow (June 23) the Trust for Public Lands will complete the transfer of ownership of 97 acres of riverfront access along the Wild and Scenic River Crooked River in Crooked River Canyon to the Crooked River Grasslands. This will enable the Forest to address cultural sites, angling and other recreational values in this area, which is inaccessible to vehicles. RAC member Mary Fleischmann asked about the current Animal Unit Months (AUMs) for cattle and sheep grazing. There is a new permit for a sheep allotment off the 4215 Road, but no additional allotments or permits will be created. RAC member Steve Lent said he appreciates the Forest's efforts to preserve graves associated with an 1845 wagon train.

Umatilla National Forest (attached)

Prineville District BLM (attached) – Amanda Roberts noted the collaborative Murderers Creek Wild Horse Joint Management Area EA with the Malheur National Forest is in its 11th year.

A fuels reduction project on Top Road with Grant County and Umatilla National Forest.

In August, the district will close on the McDonald's Ferry acquisition of 4,400 acres along the John Day River. Access will be through McDonald's Ferry Lane.

Thanks to a local mountain biking group working to educate the public about the user-created biking trails within the Horse Ridge Recreation Area east of Bend. A travel management plan is being developed to authorize appropriate routes and will be the district's first plan to incorporate eBikes.

A proposed Programmatic Solar Environmental Assessment will emphasize transparency while protecting natural resources, public lands and adjacent private lands, preventing negative impacts and promoting rights-of-way use. The district has received five applications for solar projects, but only one, the Expedition Project in Deschutes County, has met the initial screening criteria and is moving forward.

Demand for use of public lands for public purposes under the multiple use mandate is increasing. The district is working with Deschutes County to identify areas appropriate for a landfill and with Redmond for a wastewater treatment facility.

Due to staffing shortages, a hold has been put on the LaPine Environmental Assessment, which will affect some grazing permit renewals.

Again, housing is a big part of the problem. The district is working with county officials, but does not plan to initiate contracting or other formal actions.

RAC member Jim Reiss asked about the proposed solar development's effect on mule deer habitat. NEPA hasn't begun yet, but will address sage-grouse, deer, eagle nest sites, winter range and other factors. ODFW will definitely be a cooperating agency. One option for deer would be spacing for migration. The Burns district is looking at taller panels to allow grazing underneath.

Reiss also asked if the district was impacted by the Forest Service's lowering of wood permit fees from \$20 to free. Dave Plummer noted that was a regional decision to assist under-served and low-income households that rely on firewood for heat.

Could the agencies put together a list of issues for RAC members to lobby for? The most critical RAC service is support for fee proposals, Amanda Roberts said. The BLM brings in more money to the US Treasury than any other agency after the IRS. \$4 comes in for every \$1 spent on BLM lands, primarily from oil, gas and mineral extraction and green energy development. Every dollar spent on recreation or grazing stays on the district.

Mary Fleischmann praised the thoroughness of the solar evaluations. She was happy to hear about the planned monarch butterfly and milkweed surveys. Her organization, Great Old Broads, planted milkweed in the Ochocos and is looking for additional stewardship opportunities.

Steve Lent noted the McDonald Crossing was a signature site on the Oregon Trail. Crook County F&R needs additional facilities, is there potential for the county to build on leased land? That's in discussion.

RAC member Tom Mottl asked if a project can be expedited. Proposals are worked through as they are received. Is the BLM receiving GAOA and Bipartisan Infrastructure Legislation funding like the Forest Service? Yes, funding goes to the region and is then distributed to the districts. Unfortunately, Vale and Prineville districts have not been identified as priority focal lands. Is there a way for the RAC to influence allocations? Those determinations are made in the legislation. For example, GAOA funds have focused on ecosystem restoration and fire management.

RAC member Jerry Brummer commented the solar facilities are only one part of the issue. The bigger issues are powerlines and infrastructure to support new facilities.

Umatilla National Forest (attached) – Clayton Collins reported the Northern Blues Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) has created 1,648 jobs and put \$33 million into the landscape. The Partnership includes federal, tribal, private and other public lands entities. The Tri-Forest (Umatilla, Malheur and Wallowa-Whitman) Plan Review is in the

pre-assessment and data gathering phase. When the assessment begins, the public and stakeholders will be notified. The RAC's input would be appreciated.

Vale District BLM (attached) – Baker Field Manager Joe Aragon noted renovations at the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center are going well and more than 500 contacts were made between the Oregon Trail Days and community Miners Jubilee events.

Burns Junction fire crew quarters replacement is nearing completion and will allow for storage of larger engines. The new Baker Crew Quarters environmental assessment is complete and design will begin soon.

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is treating grasshoppers and Mormon cricket infestations in southern Malheur County. Although the Baker Field Office has received complaints, the local volume does not meet APHIS criteria.

Vale District has emphasized recruitment and outreach at all levels to raise awareness about career and employment opportunities with the BLM, attending events and programs, and also presenting at various events and programs. A local youth crew have helped with fencing and cutting back blackberries at three campgrounds.

Baker and Malheur recreation staff spent several days monitoring along the Owyhee River and conducting monitoring and cleanup along the Wallowa and Grande Ronde rivers.

RAC member Jim Reiss noted use may be reaching the point where fees are needed for the Owyhee River, and eventually the Wallowa and Grande Ronde. Is the district looking at that? Very preliminary discussions are taking place.

Other topics of note are the Proposed Land Rule, which would put conservation on the same level as grazing, recreation and other uses when addressing the multiple use mandate. The comment period was recently extended.

Presentation: South Fork Walla Walla Area of Environmental Concern Environmental Assessment

Assistant Baker Field Manager Sandy Tennyson gave a brief history of the ACEC and the flood event that brought about the need for a new environmental assessment (EA) (PowerPoint attached). The 1992 management plan was for riparian ecosystems, fisheries habitat and scenic values. Recreation has increased significantly since then and there are concerns that overuse is damaging the resource. Nearby Harris Park has been developed with 35 campsites, a tribal hatchery was built downstream. Flooding in 2020 washed out significant portions of trail and road along the river that provided access to a BLM trailhead, an extensive Umatilla National Forest trail network, and several privately owned cabins.

Shay White asked what will be done about the road washout. Before any work to rehabilitate or rebuild the trail or road can begin, the new EA must be completed. That process began in late 2022 with public scoping open houses. Now an interdisciplinary team is working to draft alternatives for consideration. Cooperating agencies are meeting periodically for updates.

Although there are other, designated access routes from the northeast, it is a long drive to reach the trailhead on that end, followed by a long hike or ride to the site. In the meantime, recreationists are creating unauthorized trails to get around the washout areas and someone has used an excavator to create an unauthorized vehicular route.

Tom Mottl asked if the cabins were inholdings. Not technically, because there is other access and a private property boundary.

Public Comment and Response: None.

Presentation: Baker City Watershed Fuels Project

WWNF Whitman District Ranger Keith Dunn gave a brief history of the project. (PowerPoint attached). The Forest is using a combination of timber harvesting, thinning and prescription fire to create safe firefighter access, defensible areas and fuel breaks to protect the municipality's water source. Through the cohesive strategy, the work is also protecting ecosystem function and protecting whitebark pine, which is a sensitive species. So far, \$12 million has been invested in the 28,000-acre area.

RAC member Terry Drever Gee asked if the Forest is working with Oregon Department of Forestry. Yes, there is a high risk of a fire on private ground making a run into the watershed. ODF is working with adjacent private property owners to create additional defensible space.

The meeting adjourned at 2 p.m. for a field tour of the watershed.

The meeting reconvened at 9 a.m. Friday, June 23, with Shay White chairing.

Discussion: JDS RAC planning subcommittees and committee assignments

Presentation: National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center renovation and program updates (attached)

Project Manager Sarah Sherman outlined the progress of the energy efficiency renovations, which will be completed later this fall. She also spoke of the Visitor Experience Interpretive Plan, which will address wayfinding, exhibits, interpretive programming and community

engagement, including a profile of target visitors and strategies to reach them. It will be implemented when the center reopens in May 2024.

RAC member Tom Mottl asked about historic visitation numbers and what is anticipated. Sherman said she hopes to see 50,000 a year, which would be a 20 to 25 percent increase.

The Center is also entering into a new friends agreement with Crossroads Carnegie Community Art Center to help with marketing and fundraising, including gift shop operations. This summer, a Teacher on the Public Lands intern will help staff develop a model for educational programming.

An Oregon Trail Days event was successful, and featured a story and dance program by representatives of the Nez Perce Tribe.

Discussion: Barr North Campground

Amanda Roberts reported the Prineville District is developing a proposed business plan and fee structure for Barr North Campground. The site has one restroom and kiosk. An overnight camping fee would help fund amenities and improvements, including water, trash and campfire rings. There is potential for some funding available from OHV permits, because the area is very popular with users. A formal presentation will be made to the RAC in the fall. There would be no charge for day use.

Discussion: JDS RAC subcommittees

Elect a vice chair: Terry Drever Gee and Susie Koppert nominated Shay White. The moment passed unanimously.

Roundtable:

Katy Nelson said the wolf situation is much worse than it seems and she doesn't know how to raise awareness. Terry Drever Gee suggested a wolf presentation for a future meeting topic.

Jim Reiss said he is concerned about eBike impacts to trails.

Steve Lent said he was interested in an effort with the Forest Service using cadaver dogs to identify graves along Oregon Trail routes between Bend and Burns.

Mary Fleischmann said she doesn't support eBikes in the Horse Ridge area, as they are making it dangerous to hike with dogs.

She also said there is a lot of misinformation about biomass. It is not carbon neutral or green due to the carbon dioxide and chemical emissions, which are 1.5 times that of coal generation. She asked what policies or regulations address these things, and noted that slash piles provide habitat.

Steve Lent said Crook County is looking at a proposal in the Prineville area and could be a good source for a presentation.

Mia Sheppard expressed concern about maintenance of the Harpham Flats campground. Amanda Roberts said there have been limitations due to staffing and capacity for servicing the site, which is managed by a partner agency. She said there could be potential for a volunteer cleanup event and would relay that message.

She asked if agencies were prepared for the solar eclipse Oct. 14. Amanda Roberts said plans from the 2017 eclipse are being used, with impacts expected to be farther east.

Susie Koppert reported tribal concerns regarding Glass Butte. She's received reports of diggers damaging rock stacks.

Mia Sheppard asked about the needs analysis to allocate permits for outfitters on the John Day River. Amanda Roberts said a third-party contract is being developed and work will probably start in the fall.

Jim Reiss asked about the distinction. Sheppard explained outfitters only receive 2 percent of permits under the new system. In the past, her business has conducted nine trips a season and this year she only had three. She added she is speaking for all outfitters, but using her personal experience to illustrate the problem.

Amanda Roberts said the public input process began in 2020 when the problem was identified. The agency is looking at phased permits for outfitters and guides based on historic use of the river. She will provide a timeline for the needs assessment at the next meeting.

Additional conversation touched on more outreach about boater etiquette. There are problems with users creating unauthorized fire rings or using nearby camps for toilets. Some users complain of people "staking" a site for future use, in violation of the first-come, first-served practice of unreserved camping.

Tom Mottl noted that he and some friends applied for permits on five rivers and none of them received one. Sheppard said everyone should be able to get on a river and if they have no equipment, they should be able to hire an outfitter.

Tom Mottl said he attended the Oregon Re-Wilding Conference, which included wolves. He felt there was a different point of view and he is willing to share that information with the group. He also serves on a non-profit board working to improve communications and relationships with the BLM. Mary Fleischmann said she knows some of the presenters at the conference and could invite them to a meeting.

Joe Aragon said a lot of what the agencies bring to the RAC is information to be shared back to the members' interest groups. It's always valuable to managers to listen to the discussions and consider different viewpoints. He appreciates the good energy and desire to solve problems.

There was general discussion about recruitment of new RAC members, particularly a Tribal representative. At the last meeting, RAC chairman Randy Jones challenged the group to start thinking about potential candidates. Larisa Bogardus said the next call for nominations would be in the fall and she would notify the group.

Future agenda topics: Utility-Scale Solar Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement; Deschutes River Railroad War of 1910; and Snake River dam removal.

Time for Public Comment: None.