

USFS Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision Meeting | March 18, 2014 | Burns, OR

Notetaker: Zack Ambrose, EnviroIssues

Approximate Attendance: 25

Questions (Q), Responses (R), and Comments (C)

Q: Does this EIS deal with noxious weeds? If not, why not?

R: There are desired conditions around invasive species and standards and guidelines. The forests have been going through an invasive species process. We are bringing the standards and guidelines forward in this plan – they are in Appendix A under the no action alternative. The plan does have objectives for treating invasive species. For the Malheur, we have been working on an EIS that should be signed this fall, this site-specific EIS will address noxious weeds.

C: I want to give some background about the County's involvement and thank the Forest Service for coming here tonight. The County has been pushing for more timber harvest this since the plan started. I've been involved since the beginning and Alternative D is as close as we could get. I'm also pessimistic as this is the third EIS in front of the county. I'm disappointed in tonight's turnout and feel that folks might be winding down. I appreciate Steve's optimism but I'm worried about the Forest Service's commitment to a mill. There are those out there that feel 55 million board feet is the cap; I want to hear you say 75 million board feet. 75 million board feet still does not leave much of a chance for this county and we should be the wealthiest in the state. We talked about recreation but the Malheur is closing campgrounds. How can we build recreation when we are closing campgrounds? I see a conflict in the plan where there is an increase in the number of visitors, but there are only two highways. I see a goal of social well-being but it doesn't mention logging or timber. A scenic integrity table is always in conflict with resources. Regarding roads, there's not even a mention of the historic roads that pre-date the Forest Service. The plan is not based on the budget but mentions the budget that limits the ability to perform maintenance. The wildland urban interface conversation is grossly misleading. While people will argue about that, when we have million acre fires, I don't know if the boundary is enough. Section 2.11 – community resilience – I think you got that right and it needs to be integrated further into the rest of the document. I also understand NEPA to require a cumulative effects analysis of social and economic impacts. And without that analysis, we can't forecast anything. In 1990, this community didn't have a lot going on. We're making the same comments again and we're going to be stuck with this plan for 25 years. I have a solution – the restoration of dry forest in eastern Oregon. Ecological forestry can help this community survive. This is backed with science. I think we've missed the opportunity to look at this as an alternative. These are my comments as the county judge and not the county court. We will give comprehensive comments. I do appreciate all of the effort but this plan has got to do better. As it is, it does not work for the community.

R: Thank you for your comments.

Q: Can you talk about the objection process?

R: We look at the overlap in objections and try to meet with a subset of individuals. If there are 500 different objections, we will meet with people individually to address them.

Q: There are a number of chemicals mentioned in the Invasive Species EIS that are not effective on noxious weeds – why not use the most effective weed tools?

R: That's one reason why our invasive EIS has taken so long. We're waiting for these new chemicals to be approved and will be included.

Q: You have to make an official comment to be able to object, correct?

R: Yes, that's correct. You will have then have standing to object.

Q: Tree age, size, standards – we're willing to do something to help with this but we can't just throw everything into a brush pile. There has to be some way to utilize smaller trees - there's no one in this town that has the type of equipment to harvest an area of that size 150,000-500,000 acres; smaller areas, such as 500 acres or below, would help us be competitive. Are there smaller contracts?

R: This is an issue for us too. We know we need some type of timber infrastructure in this county. We have been working to put smaller contracts out. There is a juniper industry here.

C: There's no economically feasible way to utilize juniper here.

R: At the same time, burning is a cost to us. If you have an opportunity to take it away and save us, we're willing to work with you on that.

Q: In the plan, is there some sort of ASQ (allowable sale quantity) identified? How much material could come from Burns?

R: There is an ASQ for the entire forest on timber production lands; it's not identified by communities, however.

Q/C: What effort has been made to administer work on the ground for contracts locally? If these are being funded by public dollars, there needs to be a social contract for those who do the work. Contractors should be local. I know that there is a personal attempt at doing this but training needs to be done and local contractors should be used.

R: The government puts contracts out for competitive bid. The contractors have the ability to compete for them.

C: The Forest Service has an itemized list of contractors that cuts it down to a smaller amount of contractors that are here. If you are an eligible contractor, you should be allowed to go after the work. The list should be larger, based on experience or prerequisites.

R: We are willing to help get contractors qualified. Acquisitions Management Regulations exist and we are not able to change those as they come from a much higher level. We have to follow

these rules and some of these are not flexible. We don't have the ability to influence them. We can help you get in the system. We can notify you about which contracts are coming out and put certain limits on those that, for example, say benefit local community over price. The key is to be offering contracts that work and we need your help with that.

Q: Is the best way to get that information out just through this comment period or how do I get to tell you that we want that type of situation set up?

R: The forest plan is not the place to do this. You can work with Christy Cheyne, Emigrant Creek District Ranger, to discuss this type of stewardship contract.

Q: I think this is the place and that I should comment on it here.

R: Work with Christy and the local folks to identify what those needs are.

Q: Does the plan define a motorized vehicle? I'm specifically looking at travel over snow.

R: It does in the glossary; it may be in Volume 3. You can talk to the specialist at the "Access" station about this definition.

C: I come away feeling a little helpless and wondering how much these comments will change the end results of the preferred alternative.

R: This is the heart of the plan. We will get 30-40,000 comments and 20,000 comments will come from outside the local area. This is not a vote – these comments have the same weight. We're looking into the future and want to get it right and be responsive. For example, we removed road density numbers as people commented that they didn't like that in the previous plan.

C: I think we need to encourage our local citizens to sit down and think about this.

R: We need your help since you are tied closer to the land than most of our employees. You have an understanding that we don't and we need your help.

Q: Has there been any thought to being a good neighbor? We know that fires come through and burn near private land. Has there been a thought to leave research natural areas (RNAs) around private lands?

R: There are discussions about the urban interface but I think what you're talking about is more about site-specific analysis that isn't in the plan. The plan doesn't identify specific locations where treatments will occur, but when you work with the district rangers, you can talk with them about specific areas. Natural processes in RNAs are part of the design – they are supposed to be studied. If a fire starts there we won't suppress it. Areas outside of this will be evaluated based on desired conditions and may be allowed to burn. A comment could be placed in the design criteria to help us consider these in the site-specific plans.

Q: Can you talk about preferred Alternative E vs F? What does doubling outputs mean? What are the restoration efforts addressed in the plan?

R: Alternative E – the timber output doubles in all areas from between 55,000 to 75,000 board feet. The timber output is based on the lands identified for timber production. There are other lands where timber can be harvested. Associated outcomes and outputs are based on restoration outputs – thinning, fencing, stream, road maintenance. There is a whole suite of these activities that we have a baseline for and those will be increasing. The most obvious increase is the timber target, it is the most quantifiable.

Q: Is this based on your budget? Does that have something to do with how much timber is harvested?

R: The more money we spend on litigation the less we can on timber harvest. We think the engagement of the community has been key to this success. This has allowed us to shift from litigation to timber harvest. We expect our harvest to increase in the coming years. We've been successful and funding has helped. Another aspect of our budget is fire suppression – it amounts to about half of the budget annually. If we can actively manage the forest, we may spend less on fire suppression.

C: Senator Wyden and Senator Crapo have released a wildfire bill. The top 1% of fires will be funded through FEMA and the idea is to quit robbing from restoration. The bill is bipartisan in both houses of Congress. At the policy level, people are looking at this issue.

Q: Is the budget the reason that you're going toward more stewardship contracts?

R: The saw log has a value and this helps pay for some of these activities.

Q: To me that's common sense. Is your plan to have more stewardship contracts?

R: Yes, if it works. We're still trying to maintain all of the tools in the toolbox.