

USFS Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision Meeting | March 20, 2014 | Enterprise, OR

Notetaker: Zack Ambrose, EnviroIssues

Approximate Attendance: 80

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

Q: What does old forest mean in context in the plan?

R: One thing that is different about this plan is that we are interested in how old trees function on the landscape. There are certain characteristics that old trees have that provide for habitat, and what we're looking for is wherever these trees occur to retain them and curate the development of more old trees. To do that, you should talk with Patty to discuss how we would identify old trees on the landscape.

C: Only Congress can designate a wilderness area. You might want to get rid of that as Congress hasn't done much in the last five years. The amount of money spent on this plan throws up a red flag to me, especially two pages on how to make a comment. The changing of the appeal process and the end goal hasn't changed the end result. You change all of that stuff and our opinions haven't changed. Why isn't Alternative A (no action) the preferred alternative? We're still not being listened to. It comes down to locking out the public from public lands. We have Forest Service law enforcement and everywhere you look there are officers in the forest. You can talk about old trees if you want them to get struck by lightning and cause fires. But nothing has changed.

R: Thanks for your comment.

C: Why should I waste my time on a comment? You're going to throw it out. The government doesn't listen to the people.

C: We're speaking up here. I'm ashamed that I'm even here. Growing up, we believed we had one of the finest reforestation plans in the Northwest – we were a model. Now I don't see any trees being planted. It's a game of linguistics. I'm ashamed that I'm here, and that I'm trying to defend something.

Q: I have a question in regard to the plan. The fine print in the regulations is where the danger is, and the special interest people are able to influence things. Who has control over the forest plan? Is it the special interest people? Are we protected by this plan? Are they able to find loopholes in the plan? How vulnerable is the Forest Service to intrusion?

R: The EIS has all of the alternatives and compares the alternatives to each other. The forest plan is built on the preferred alternative. The details of all of the alternatives that were examined – they are not rules and regulations – they are the details that were looked at.

C: People here are gun shy. The wolf situation is one example.

C: People here can't trust the Forest Service. They changed the rules in 1991. We can't do our daily activities and use our land because some extreme environmentalist has found a bug and isn't funded

locally. In 2003, everything changed again. You promise the people one thing and then go behind our backs to change the rules. When are we supposed to believe you? Everyone is interested in accessing the forest in the way they want. That's being jeopardized by foreign interests. We understand wilderness, land use, preservation – we've been on the top of that list forever. But we're being stepped on by the multi-national environmentalists. We can't stand up to foreign money.

C: That's a pretty substantial book (the draft EIS) for someone to read in 90 days and comment on. You're going to have to extend the comment period.

R: We're getting requests to extend the comment period. It will be the regional forester's decision.

C: It has to be a substantial extension, as it's going to take a substantial amount of time to review this document.

C: We are very proud of this county and this area and the resources that are here. We're willing to share them and accommodate people from all over the world. But when we start shutting down those areas and allowing foreign interests into our areas and place them ahead of the local residents who live here, if we allow things to be taken over the way they have been done over the last few years, we're going to lose our identity. If we don't have these things, it's going to be a detriment to the entire society.

R: We've talked before and I believe in the multiple use vision for the forests and especially to help the local community. I also know that I have the responsibility to steward those lands. At my age I remember my time as a kid and using the natural lands – I want that for the future. The forest plan comment period is your chance to make these comments and have an impact. Talk with the technical experts and you'll find they are a great resource and will be able to answer your questions.

Q: This meeting was too early in the comment period. Is it possible to come back later in the comment period?

A: We don't expect you to have read and be ready to comment on the plan already. We are interested in hearing from you for the next best way to engage. Should there be workshops where we talk about specific issues? We will be working with the cooperating agencies and the public moving forward.

Q/C: My wife had been calling people in Wallowa County to convince them to attend. She found that many people felt they didn't have much to gain by attending. How many acres on the Wallowa-Whitman are proposed for additional wilderness areas?

R: 20,000 acres

Q: How many board feet of timber are tied up with that?

R: Many of these lands are already under land designations that don't allow timber harvesting, but I don't know the amount of board feet that includes.

Q: We have a lot of insects in the forest – was this addressed in the document?

R: It is addressed indirectly in the document as it lays out an overall vision that is not site-specific. The new farm bill allows us to act faster to address bug-killed trees.

Q/C: I saw something in the references that really disturbed me. How much of the information in the plan is based on facts vs. modeling?

R: There is probably a fair amount based on models. Models are a way of trying to understand the future. There is also a lot based on data that is collected in the forest. You should talk to the specialists about your questions.

C: Models are based on assumptions and sometimes guesses. Sometimes you get bad science.

R: I'd be happy to talk to you about models and how they are reviewed.

C: The vision is to maintain a healthy forest landscape and watersheds. I'd like to know the specifics around timber yields. Someone might say to you that you set the ASQ (allowable sale quantity) based on budgets. What I'd like to suggest is that the Forest Service take the county's comprehensive plan that calls for 209,000 acres suitable for timber production based on total national forest acres in the county. What's the difference between available timber and the harvested amount?

R: I know that there is a difference between what you are recommending and what is in the preferred alternative. I don't have those figures off the top of my head.

Q: Will the individual plans be breakouts from this draft plan for each individual forest?

R: There will be an individual plan for each forest.

Q: After catastrophic events – fire, blow-downs, bug infestations – the Forest Service used to get in there and salvage the timber. In Bear Creek they salvaged logs that could have been used by someone. How do you decide how salvaged timber is utilized?

R: One of the reasons we want to increase our scale and pace of restoration is because we've fallen behind. The new provisions in the farm bill allow us to move faster to salvage in these areas.

C: With any catastrophic event, you should drop the forest plan and try to salvage the wood. If we wait too long to harvest, it's not worth salvage. We have a lot of bug infestations out there and would not have to cut green trees.

C: Wasn't there one alternative to do nothing? The people have made it pretty clear that this is their preferred alternative.

R: The way we analyze things there is always a no-action alternative, which would continue management under the current plan as amended.

C: I don't trust the EIS – there are facts that aren't legitimate.

R: If you want to stay under the current plan, you should submit that comment and provide reasons why.

C: This plan is still restricting access to our public lands and we need to start using our resources. This area has a long history of taking care of ourselves and we had a healthier forest. We've been managed way too much.

R: Please talk to some of our specialists during the open house.

C: We used to have 5-7 mills in the county - now we have one. It's frustrating to see.

Q: I guess I'm a tree hugger, but I have an understanding that the extraction of natural resources is a necessity to sustain the area's economy, so I'm not opposed to wise and consciously managed use of natural resources. I think that's the mission statement of the Forest Service. I wonder at the tone in the room that doesn't trust the Forest Service and the history of experience with federal institutions. I share that distrust, but I see that an effort is being made at the forest level to establish principles and obtain comment and, through consensus, to present options for management of natural resources. Everyone has a different take, but I think we need to talk about sustainability and climate change. How are they addressed in the preferred alternative? You can't have sustainability in the face of climate change.

R: Sustainability is addressed in calculations of quantities of outputs, and they have to be made to ensure we're meeting our longer vision. Climate change is incorporated through projections that might happen in the future and these can change quite frequently. They are taken into account at the site-specific, project level.

Q: What flexibility do you have for the plan moving forward?

R: This goes back to the standards, guidelines, and desired vision. If we establish more guidelines than standards, it allows us to be more flexible under the plan. In the past we'd have to amend the plan if there was a better method to use to reach the same objective. As proposed, we could use other methods under a guideline.

Q: How binding is the plan on the people in Washington DC? You can have the best plan in the world but they can change it.

R: I can tell you that the forest plan discusses management. Politics is not my business.

Q: Are there wildlife corridors recommended in the preferred alternative?

R: Yes

C: From what I've seen, these corridors are very dangerous to people, and we have a lot of these areas in the county. Extreme environmentalists will push for more corridors all the way from Canada to Mexico.

Q: Why does the Forest Service feel that it is important or beneficial to make the Huckleberry addition to the wilderness area?

R: I know sometimes it is boundary issues where we are trying to straighten up these areas. It's these additions to existing wilderness that, for the most part, have wilderness qualities already.

Q: Over the years we've reduced personnel, if you are truly going to increase the economic goals, do you have the personnel to do that?

R: There have been additional resources put toward restoration activities.

Q: Will you be increasing your staff?

R: Yes.

C: I'd rather see our money spent to bring people in for restoration.

R: We're looking at a variety of options – including contracting with the state to share resources or collaborate. This may also involve private companies.

Q: Are there no roads in the areas that are going to be put into wilderness and wildlife corridors?

R: There are very few roads in these areas.

C: If you make them wilderness or wildlife corridors, the existing roads will close.

R: Not until there is a separate NEPA analysis for these site-specific projects.

C: These roads will be closed.

Q: How can you say that this isn't about travel management? The alternatives talk about travel management.

R: It lays out our management areas and desired conditions. If we were to close anything in any area, it has to go through a site specific analysis.

Q: What is backcountry?

R: It generally lines up with inventoried roadless areas. I would talk with Dennis during the open house about your questions.

Q: In your proposed wilderness areas, there are two tiny chunks that connect to already designated wilderness areas. What do you propose that would do?

R: Some of this would clean up the boundary of these areas. The ones on the Malheur I'm not familiar with. It would be a good comment if you discussed why you don't think wilderness areas are appropriate. What would your alternative be?

C: The feeling that you're getting tonight is distrust of our public servants. The stack of paper is very technical and is designed so lawyers can handle it and language is very important. When you use the term restoration, that comes across to us as being restored to the time when people were not on the land and unfortunately we can't go back in time and we have to use the resources. In my mind there is a split between preservation and stewardship. The carbon will be suppressed if it is in resources that we use – paper, houses, etc. I also understand that you can massage science and statistics and come up with anything we want to. We can see that there is more correlation to climate change and sun cycles than to what humans are doing. We're in a closed system and if carbon is here, it will be utilized. One of the things that need to happen is to utilize our resources. All of the problems/points you lay out are solved when we can get in and take care of the forest. When you take something out it allows other things to grow. There will be a fire and we don't want to see that happen again.

R: I strongly believe we are multiple-use agency and I don't like the term restoration either. I'm going to define restoration as restore the resilience of the ecosystem. We want to go out and do on the land what is necessary to restore the land. I'm a big believer of utilization and feel that we should be using the products that are available to us. There's a lot of uncertainty about climate change including what happens on a global scale. The biggest change I can see is the change in snow pack and that is a problem for us.

C: Climate change is a cycle that will keep going. What you're hearing here is that we have to be able to have access, and be able to take the resources from the land. It doesn't seem that the Forest Service comes out and says that resources should be given to the people. A majority of the property has been locked up. We can make these forests better by using them and the forests currently aren't getting that.

C: It's the people who live here that should take care of it. We use the forest a lot. We don't want to see anything happen. Your specialists will whatever the government wants them to say. Nothing has changed but the words. No one is going to pay attention to our comments or appeals.

Q: Is the forest plan going to affect rules regarding access to firewood and cutting firewood?

R: I don't think so. Access requires a site-specific NEPA analysis. I don't think there are areas taken out of production and there should be a lot more opportunities for firewood.

C: Access is also a safety issue – I had to drive further to get firewood and got stuck. It is a common sense thing that if there is a good tree close by to harvest it. Instead of having rules in the textbook, use the boots on the ground. The Forest Service needs to have some flexibility.

R: I think that comes down to using new regulatory tools. And that's not the specific detail in the plan and would be under the site-specific areas. The farm bill allows us under certain conditions to treat areas without a lengthy environmental process and make certain areas available.

Q: Firewood cutting is listed under recreation, and should probably be changed.

R: Firewood is counted in our timber targets and we get credit for firewood that is produced. It counts toward forest productivity.

Q: The point of this meeting is to roll out information. Can you tell me if comments are weighted?

R: No - if we get 10,000 form letters, it counts as one comment. What makes local comments so good is that you have an understanding of the area. You have a sense of this place. If you are making a comment like that, it really means something. If I'm making a comment from afar, I can't be nearly as specific as someone on the ground. We read and analyze all of the comments and they become part of the public record.

Q: Can you explain every line in the plan that is subject to interpretation, litigation, and objection? If you are faced with a lawsuit from an interest group, does the plan lose its standing?

R: If we put together a project and we do our best to comply with the laws that we have to comply with, and someone wants to sue us, we will go to court. We were sued over Snow Basin timber sales, we went to federal district court and they asked for a temporary restraining order. The judge ruled in our favor. The decision was appealed but we aren't stopping. Sometimes we do get a restraining order. We're doing a good job and complying with the law and our forest collaborative projects. One of the things we're trying to establish is trust. I believe in our mission. I can't make people believe me, but I can be honest and straight forward.

C: Through the collaborative process, everyone is getting a seat at the table. This drowns out the general public and our voice is reduced. The problem is that you are the government.

R: That has happened on other projects and we are working on it now. In my personal experience with the local collaborative, your county representatives are pretty good voices for you.

C: That is a good step forward but we're still concerned. We feel that our comments will be ignored. By necessity and money, special interests groups can stop these projects.

R: It's hard to hear the distrust but it's important to hear it, and I need to hear it. But if we don't try to change things then we're going to see the forest fail. One of the advantages that we have is that we still have mills and people who work in the woods. When we tried to do this return to resilience in Arizona, the first thing they had to do was to convince someone to move back in and harvest the area. One thing that our regional forester knows is that we have to do something to sustain the infrastructure and the mills while we still have them.

C: I'm interested in better guidance and maps. I can't tell from the maps if the roads exist. My personal philosophy is that if the road is open or a tree is available then I can access it. I don't have good guidance. Since I've been here for five years, the map has stayed the same.

R: I haven't met people that want to do things wrong in the forests. When I first got here and talked to people about what happened with the last travel management plan, one of the things that people told me was that the maps aren't accurate. We're in the process of producing an existing condition map that will show roads that are open and closed, roads that are legally closed but being used, and roads that open and are not being used. Underneath that is a wealth of information – volume of vehicles, seasonal closures, etc. I'm thinking of a map that is easy to understand. Once we have maps ready, we will ask the public if it is the most accurate, not 100%, but close enough. Once we have a map we can agree on, then we can discuss what we need to change to better manage the forest. We're not going to come up with a map that has no roads because we need those to manage the forest. The point I would like to eventually get to is to stand around and tell our stories. Tell us why you need access to these areas and why it is important. It's my responsibility to take care of resource issues like that. Until we can get to that point, and have those discussions, I can't see us moving forward on figuring this out. To me, it is about opening a dialogue and understanding the issues around access. I think there is a middle ground. I don't think there is anyone in the room tonight that doesn't care about the stewardship of the Wallowa-Whitman forest. That gives us a place to sit down and start talking. We all live in your communities too. We are part of your community. It doesn't help to build trust and then be presented with a new face. The idea behind the collaborative group is to expand that trust.

C: The boundaries for firewood areas and other areas also need to be updated. You don't know if you are in the right area.

R: This is specific information that if you talk to the district ranger we can start talking about that. Our mapping tools and technology have changed.

Q: Most of the problem is not with you folks. What do we do to help you be able to manage?

R: You can comment on the proposed plan and tell us what's right and what's wrong. We're trying to do a better job of having our documents meet the needs so people don't feel they need to sue us. On the Malheur, they have been successful with collaboration and reducing litigation. What you can do is be involved on an individual project level. If there are projects coming out, comment on them and see if your comments are being addressed.

Q: What's the timeline to make comments?

R: 90-days. There are already requests for extensions and will probably happen.