

USFS Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision Meeting | March 26, 2014 | La Grande, OR

Notetaker: Melissa Thom, EnviroIssues

Approximate Attendance: 275

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

Q: You're hosting a meeting in Portland but the reading location handout doesn't say where in Portland someone can read the proposed plan. You could read in Riggins, Idaho or Seattle, but not Portland.

R: There is the Forest Service regional office in Portland where you can go; we will correct the handout.

C: I'm a 28 year employee of Boise Cascade. We need timber coming through the mills for jobs and our future, and forest access is also important. Please take input from communities when developing travel and timber plans.

Q: I'm confused with designation of wilderness. There is some wilderness with roads. Will wilderness have old logging roads, stumps, etc, or are you going to go back in and change it? Wilderness means to me that it is pristine habitat. What is the Forest Service's definition of wilderness?

R: Wilderness can contain remnants of activities from past lives and mines and timber harvests. Some wilderness has been heavily harvested and it is easy to find stumps from past harvests but no active management in those areas at this time. Example is the North Fork John Day where there was a fire and road in there and an active ditch and that's still there; some things can continue.

C: The people in the nature groups don't believe that area is pristine – they have pictures that they think it's pristine and it has been misrepresented. I thought wilderness means it has never been mined or had roads, but that's not the case. That's a comment.

R: In some cases it is pristine; Dennis in the back can talk to you about it specifically.

C: Looking through alternatives, I see energy development listed as what will be accommodated. Industrial wind farm on public lands eliminates consistency with local use because it displaces wildlife, destroys habitat and view-scapes for miles around, and increases fire danger. Too many dangers with wind development and it is not an appropriate use for area that should be multiple use.

Q: The 1990 forest plan estimated 20 plus million board feet. That was estimated that the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest (WWNF) was planning to harvest. In this plan, Table 41 indicates the WWNF harvested 41,915 board feet. The current plan estimates that the WWNF will up their harvest to 104,022? Are you going to start paying timber companies to harvest and paying the mills to take them? What about lawsuits?

R: We are working hard with a variety of partners to improve the ability to do projects without getting into litigation. Plan talks about objections, and what people are concerned about goes through an objection process before we sign a ROD. Considerable acceleration in the future compared to what we've been doing recently. It's the regional forester's belief that if we don't increase our rate for that work, we won't get any gains.

Q: Is it the Eastside Strategy that is proposing to accelerate this plan?

R: Starting acceleration on the Malheur National Forest and other forests right now, had extra funding in last few years and want to spread to entire Eastside of Oregon and Washington.

Q: In the first document, the plans emphasize dry forest restoration management. There is a lot of moist forest that is in need of restoration and could provide a lot of material for the local community. So why is there emphasis on dry forests only? And with Eastside doing restoration in next three years, what's next?

R: We want to see the plan return us to resilient landscapes whether it's dry or moist. Part of that depends on analysis and how it relates to how we are in relation to the landscape. There is nothing in the plan that prevents us from working in those areas if it moves us to the desired condition.

Q: Are you required to put wilderness in this program?

R: In the 1982 planning rule, we are required to evaluate wilderness, but the alternatives show the range in how that can be done. Alternative D recommends no new wilderness, while Alternative C recommends a lot more wilderness than any of the alternatives, and Alternative E recommends only about 20% of the wilderness in Alternative C. The different alternatives provide different amounts of recommended wilderness, and the Regional Forester will select the alternative.

Q: Over time, you have proposed 90,000 acres to go into wilderness. If you propose that much every time, how long will it take for our forest to disappear?

R: What's being recommended is in large part adjacent to existing wilderness to clean up borders, etc., and for administrative reasons, too. If you look at wilderness recommendations in the alternatives, check with Dennis in the back, he can talk to you about the process for doing that. That concern to tack on more wilderness might not come up in the next plan iteration.

Q: On comments we will be making – are we going to get anything back demonstrating that you paid attention to them?

R: We hope that people will see the response to comments in terms of the FEIS which will be brought back to the public. We know that in a group this size in Oregon, we will have comments that range from one end of the spectrum to the other, and some place in there we will craft an alternative that answers as much as we can. The ROD will explain why it was done and address

issues uncovered in this process. When we do content analysis; we also use a third party to help us look at the comments, objectively, so they will read and analyze the comments and then we will create a report that will show all the comments, who commented, comments that were coded, etc. The team develops responses to similar comments, like if there are a lot about wilderness that are similar, the team will develop a response and that report will be shared on the website.

Q: In wilderness, under the alternatives expanding wilderness, I'm concerned that say you expand the boundaries, like in Elkhorn Mountains, I have mixed emotions. What about access points? Adding 5,000 additional acres of wilderness and access points will remain the same? The Elkhorn mountains have no access points for horse trailers, mostly for on foot. Has something been set aside for wilderness access points?

R: That's a really good concern. Part of it is that there is a long process before it will become wilderness. We would look at recreation opportunities up there and how to serve those if it goes to that point of designation. That's a question for us to answer: if this recommended wilderness is designated, would it in fact improve recreation opportunities?

Q: You mentioned the plan is for greatest good for the greatest number. It's scary if we look at that for the plan, is it for these counties, for the state? Is it for the nation or the world? For the wolf issue, the comments that hurt us came from a ways away and didn't have to deal with wolves at the back door – how will comments be evaluated? Will any extra weight be given for local comments? Important for us economically, health and schools, etc. Your statement talks about substantive comments and non-substantive comments – how are those determined?

R: The greatest good question: Forest Service is a multiple-use agency, and our team and regional team takes that very seriously. Loggers, permittees remind us about providing for this area and for the county. I understand the importance of that flow off the forest and into local communities and we are trying to increase the pace of restoration and wood products, and grazing program, clean water, etc. In terms of ability to make comments, if you sign a form letter with 5,000 others, it doesn't have much impact because it's counted as one comment. It's not a vote; we just pick what's right. If you're familiar with the land and communities you can provide much deeper comments. You all have local knowledge and that allows you to craft a comment that gives good information about why something does or does not work. There is an advantage to local knowledge.

Q: And people who make substantive comments get standing in objective period?

R: "I think Alternative E stinks" is not a substantive comment, but if you say "I don't like it because" and provide the reason why it's not appropriate, and "here's what I would do," that's a substantive comment. Objection process gives standing to people who make substantive comments. Non-substantive comments do not help the process and the development of the final Forest Plan and those commenters do not have standing; therefore they can't object during the

objection period. Additionally, substantive comments would address the specifics of the plan. For example, specific timber sales is out of the scope of the plan, but commenting that a guideline should really be a standard is in the scope of the plan and is substantive.

Q: I'm curious how much recommended wilderness came out of the last roadless mapping exercise in the 1994 document. And how much of the proposed road closures around wilderness areas will be in the next one?

R: Recommended wilderness areas in inventoried roadless areas do not include roads. Non-motorized backcountry has primitive qualities – these boundaries were drawn to virtually eliminate including any roads.

C: We listen to wilderness areas coming in and they keep getting bigger. We protested hard against the North Fork wilderness. The Forest Service got rid of all the roads and cabins and historic mining. That's how it was passed. Wilderness can't have signs of human habitation. Executive orders, by stroke of a pen can, like they did in Utah, just sign these areas away.

R: The Wilderness Act invests Congress only with the ability to create wilderness. The national monuments process is separate and authorized by the president.

Q: You've met with groups and various cooperators and agencies. In the plan you refer to watershed and riparian restoration and fish habitat. I work for the Grande Ronde Model Watershed and we weren't asked to participate in the process. Why?

R: Some groups we meet with like the county commissioners have cooperating agency status which has special meaning in the NEPA process. We have tried to meet with various groups over the years, but I'm not sure how the Grande Ronde Model Watershed missed out during the public process. There is still plenty of opportunity for someone from Grand Ronde Model Watershed to invite the Forest Service to come and speak with you.

Q: The phrase "traditional cultural properties" relates to the fact that my wife and I are natives of Eastern Oregon. How are these traditional cultural properties addressed in the alternatives, or are they?

R: It is addressed in all alternatives and is part of our desired condition for the social well being goal that we honor those places. We've talked about our special places. Talk about places that mean a lot to each other, the more we understand those stories and what goes into them is important.

Q: Access – your brochure says that the revised plan does not close National Forest System roads. But in 2013 the Forest Service decommissioned 700 miles of non-Forest System roads, and in the 2015 budget justification, you say you will decommission non-needed roads. Do you plan to close non-Forest Service system roads? I'm concerned about RV access in various areas

R: Those decisions are made in a site-specific analysis, so anything we would do to close user-created trails and roads would fall under travel management activities, which is a site-specific decision and requires additional NEPA and public engagement. We lay out desired conditions, like motorized use is suitable in different places. The context is in the plan but the decision on the ground is site-specific and involves NEPA and additional public engagement.

C: Just under two years ago, a lot of people in this room were involved in successfully scrapping the TM plan and that's a big deal. Commend the people who made that happen. Last Friday, Governor Herbert signed a bill demanding the feds relinquish ownership of land in Utah in 2015.

GiveUsOurLandBack.org has had a petition going around since 2012 and they are proposing that the Oregon legislature endorse their petition to de-federalize land and return it to the counties. We would have a county forester in every county. It's radical but we've had 2/3 of a century under central planning. It's radical to see our mineral wealth lying un-used and forestry not used to best of the ability. No animosity for Forest Service but putting lands back into county use and having county determine best use would be best thing for us locally, because these are our lands. Don't want to ask for permission when none is required. Other counties have done this, like in NM and AZ. Turned Forest Service roads into county roads so people there have a say. We should start moving in that direction. Get rid of our dependency or management of the feds in our lands and our lives.

Q: Talking about economics in NE Oregon, wondering if people like to go back to the cubic footage taken off during hay-day of logging. Boise Cascade made incredible profits and counties made living wages. When we think about economics of a community, are you thinking about sustainability of the jobs in the community over the immediate profits of corporations? Does the Forest Service look at regenerative potential of forest service lands and compare that with your cutting? Time wise, what it takes to cut the tree – most are not going to local mills, but are being exported, so just creating timber faller and truck driver job. Sustainability of jobs in Union County and putting higher weight on that and not being overly influenced by quick profits not in this community. I'm also concerned about grazing, which is for profit. If grazing is done in a common area where individual people could have their cows on the land, that would be economic good for the community. People would have meat on the table as opposed to a few local ranchers making more money than most of us. What do you really look at - economics of the community or of the few?

R: There is a detailed analysis in the DEIS on economic sustainability and we looked at both the economics for the community and individuals. We are concerned with supporting the greatest good for the long haul, so we need to make sure we don't abuse the natural resources and use them beyond sustainability.

Q: I'm still working through the big plan, but one conclusion that has become clear is that the three key issues you're responding to, economic, social and ecological, there seems to be a preeminence of one over the other. The ecological resiliency seems the primary goal of the plan and that creates imbalance and harms the social and economics of what the plan is trying to accomplish. Of the standards and guides, conditions, objectives, the sheer weight and volume of those, the ecological

direction and perimeters, more paragraphs and pages are dedicated to the ecological concerns. There are a limited number of items that address social and economic. Can you explain why that is?

R: That exists because we are for the most part land managers, and the social and economic benefits flow from there. If we're focused on resiliency, we can look at the products that come off the forest, and then we can get to economic and social benefits. Where those circles come together, that's the debate in the room about how those circles are arranged for the biggest sweet spot. And that's what the comment period is about; you helping us meet a better goal for those areas.

Q: I had the opportunity to read the revised preferred alternative, and the paragraph talking about trails used for foot and packing traffic says there are conflicts between users. Has the team witnessed these conflicts in order to include them in the vision area of these documents?

R: I can't speak for the team, but some of that comes from law enforcement reports and wilderness rangers within the three forests.

C: I look at this and see restrictions. Of the acreage outlined on page 75, how many acres will be restricted access if these designations are passed? When you consolidate people into smaller areas you will create more conflicts. Doesn't make sense to restrict even more and defeats the purpose of the vision. I've lived here 23 years and I'm an outdoors enthusiast and have witnessed very few user conflicts, even during hunting seasons. I've commented for the last ten years and when there are opportunities, would hope my local experience and opinions would weigh more because there's more value. Wealth of knowledge here and I would hope you provide more outreach to locals over others.

Q: I've lived here 74 years. I started fighting the Forest Service in 2000, and the plans just seem to get bigger every year. There is always some new proposal about closing this road or that, and now there's a new one coming out this year. This is elaborate setup. What is your budget for this year to keep this forest plan going?

R: \$770,000 for the plan for the three forests for this year, mostly because it takes a large team to support the effort. Economically, it's less expensive because we don't have three separate teams for the separate forests.

Q: On page 38, Alternative E is preferred and proposes 90,800 acres for wilderness. But page 90 in Volume 1 talks about Congress' authority. The need for additional wilderness in Blue Mountains was assessed in 2010 and the report says that based on the above criteria, no additional wilderness is needed, but is based on public comment. So we here just want to maintain the wilderness we have, not create more. Are there outside groups influencing the Forest Service or Congressional authority than the public and primary users?

R: I don't know what influences Congress. I haven't received any pressure from any one about wilderness. The wilderness identified in the alternatives is in response to comments from the

public. In the scoping process, people wanted less wilderness, no wilderness, and some wanted a lot more.

Q: The forest plan revision does not close roads?

R: Correct.

Q: But the plan says that during hunting season, emphasis is placed on closing roads to motorized vehicles. That sounds like closing roads.

R: Road closures have to go through a site-specific process, which includes additional NEPA and public engagement; however the desired condition is described in the forest plan. If you think that statement shouldn't be there, please provide a comment. Site-specific is required, no matter what the plan says. And that decision will have public comment.

C: This document will be used as justification for closing roads.

Second Round

Q: About economics, jobs in the restoration process, and ecosystem restoration. Forest Service work is predicted to increase, so what's the budget for that? What is the overall budget in these three counties and what is the cost for management, fire suppression, etc., things that cost in the forest? And the sustainability part of the sales - what is the difference in cost between that and what you take in for sales and grazing?

R: That is a complicated question to answer. Generating income depends on the type of sale, among other things.

Q: Do you know the cost of maintaining a forest versus what you make on it? Is it a positive or negative number? If negative, the tax payer has to pay to help implement the plan.

R: Tax payers pay for national forest system lands. I know the budget for the Wallowa Whitman is \$23 million.

C: It would be nice if you guys made some money so we didn't have to pay so much.

R: We understand. We are trying to produce more outputs.

Q: With proposed wilderness, what happens with fire in distant wilderness when you're not allowed to fight in there and it destroys natural resources?

R: We suppress fires in existing wilderness. If there is a possibility for resource benefit, even with prescribed fire, we can do that. The fire suppression situation in the whole country depends on if we have resources to do that.

Q: At the collaborative meeting today there was a discussion about how this was your one shot to get public comment on proposed wilderness through the NEPA process – what does that mean?

R: If the wilderness recommendation goes forward through this NEPA process, there won't be another NEPA process or opportunity for public comment, before Congress makes a decision. This is your chance to comment on wilderness now because then it moves onto Congress. Congress doesn't have to go out for public comment on their decision.

Q: If you propose wilderness, what about active gold mines? Will you buy them out or not allow more vehicles to go out there? Like in Wallowa-Whitman where you wouldn't allow small crushers? Make it so it's just for the resources?

R: I don't know the answer because mining is covered by special laws. Jeff Tomac can talk with you in the open house.

C: My problem with the proposal is that I have seen so much waste in how the Forest Service spends their money. Like dumping seed out and not using them. And the attitude of Forest Service cops that pack guns now is getting bad. I miss the past employees who used respect. The officers with guns need to change their attitude when dealing with the public.

R: I will pass that comment along. Law enforcement now reports to a different supervisor but we work closely with them. If you have specific issues I will be happy to pass them along.

Q: I have trouble with how you depict the alternatives, like A is always a no action, when in reality it reflects a plan that has been amended 40 times, and 3 alternatives are very substantive that are directed at the forest. A lot of the alternatives dangle the carrot of logging and logging community when in the 1990 plan, it stated that you would do sustainable logging on the forest, but now you have other alternatives. So my question is whether it is sustainable now where it wasn't originally in the 90s.

R: Calculations have changed to show products with sustainability. We haven't carried that load of activity that was proposed in the 1990s. The level of harvest in the forest plan alternatives have been assessed in terms of sustainability or what can be sustained.