

USFS Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision Meeting | March 27, 2014 | Halfway, OR

Notetaker: Melissa Thom, EnviroIssues

Attendance: 40

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

C: Baker County Board of Commissioners will be preparing formal comments to respond. Alternative D is what the counties of Eastern Oregon grouped together to prepare. Some of our points were included, some weren't. Baker County asked for desired cut of 84 million feet, and Alternative E is only 47 million, so there's a big difference. We met with council out here and recreation and snowmobiling is so important. Just some things we're concerned about. The Natural Resources Committee will talk about the planning effort and will look toward the extension in the comment period, because we have a few other documents being reviewed. This is our next targeted approach to provide a response of the whole. Contact me or my colleagues and if you want, Holly Kerns is our planner and will do the natural resources part.

Q: Why is climate change being considered when it's been proven to be faulty science?

R: People have a range of opinions on that. Whether it's faulty or not, I believe it's a good thing to think about because what are the consequences if it does actually change? We want to be prepared to deal with it no matter what. That's one thing we do, try to anticipate what could happen and manage for that.

Q: This plan goes from an open forest unless signed closed, to a closed forest unless signed open?

R: That's not in this plan, that's site-specific NEPA under travel management. This plan does not change cross-country travel on the forest. Site-specific NEPA needs to be completed, which includes public engagement, to close roads or change cross-country travel.

Q: It looks like Alternative A is the only alternative that keeps the forest open unless signed closed?

R: Alternative A doesn't address that and doesn't make those determinations. This may be a desired condition but we would still need to go through site-specific travel management to make that happen.

Q: My question is about the Sustainable Development for Mineral Application that was signed in 2003 by the Forest Service and BLM. It pertains to the Johannesburg Accord that was signed by Secretary of State Colin Powell. This document stipulates that FS and BLM, in implementing or considering mineral applications, will consider paragraph 46 of the Mining of Minerals Policy Act. Is that how we came up with other plan criteria like corridors or amenities for protections and have gotten away from USC code 472 which stipulated forest reserves would be managed for production of timber and water?

R: We still have our mission of ensuring management and stewardship of lands for production of goods and services including timber and water. Not as aware of the accords as you are, but we're not being told not to produce timber or water from national forests.

Q: On the Westside of Oregon, the BLM's RMP was overturned and has to be redone because they did not meet timber production quotas per the O&C Act. The O&C Act is similar to the Forest Reserve Act. Have you considered and looked at potential for that issue to occur here?

R: We are aware of the Western Oregon Plan revision, but believe O&C provides some specific provisions that aren't in the Forest Reserve Act. The O&C Act has specific provisions for the BLM.

C: We developed a road access plan in conjunction with the Pine Needle Consensus Group for caring for the land. I've been through this process and a few others. I see all these FS supervisors, a different one every two years with a different agenda but it's always the same at the end. I wonder if you're just another one with a different agenda. But I'm willing to listen. I think we need to get rid of the travel restrictions and wilderness proposals for all the alternatives. I only see two that are feasible, Alternative A and D.

R: For the purpose of what we're talking about, this is bigger than any individual forest supervisor. This has a lot of team work and three forest supervisors. The regional forester makes the decision and we are required to go through this process. I appreciate your willingness to work with me.

C: It is disheartening to go through this and it's just another day and the same thing over and over.

Q: Your six main points included old growth - how will old growth be designated?

R: We don't designate old growth in the preferred alternative. The FS looks for old tree characteristics across the landscape. We used to have a 21-inch rule; but some trees may still be really small in diameter and be really old. And some are bigger but younger. Broken tops and cavities are also characteristics we look for. There are new approaches to identifying old forests and whether it has characteristics we want to retain. Suggest you go back to Patty's station to show you the characteristics. Van Pelt Guidelines are being used in a number of places to help our crews use that information when they are out looking for old trees.

C: I've attended the last couple of meetings and I've been frustrated. I'm frustrated with the process, not with our neighbors, or John. This process feels like it is intended to overwhelm us and outlast those of us who have resisted from the start. It feels like the deck is stacked against the citizens of Eastern Oregon. Feels like big government and manipulation of people. Eastern Oregon residents have consistently and overwhelmingly shown we don't want restrictions on the forest. While this plan doesn't do specific closures, it does develop context from which road closures can occur at a later date. We need to brace ourselves for road closure at a future point. There's a lack of support from officials in the area who are just riding the fence on these issues. We've asked for help in keeping what we have left. Not part of it, all of it. Eastern Oregon access to forests is important. Proactive

support from local officials in the onset might have helped prevent that. I chose to sit through last two meetings without making a statement or question. I'm frustrated that I didn't speak sooner. Issues at hand are too great. Speak your mind whether you agree with me or not.

C: You've got an orange spot in my playground where you want more wilderness. I've seen the maps through the years. Lots of maps. Ongoing process. The wilderness has grown and grown. I know you don't address roads in this plan, but when you take an area that is open now with roads and then classify it as wilderness, you are closing roads and use. North Powder River is a beautiful area and historic. Mining roads have gone through there for over 100 years and you will close it off but it's against the law. That's the biggest fire danger out there. Ride horses and four wheelers up there and it's dangerous. I would like to ask you to stop adding wilderness. A million acres on your maps and the numbers - whether it's wilderness or just study or recommended - it's a lot of area. I build houses for a living, and when I make a recommendation to the home owner they usually take it. People in Congress will listen to your recommendation. We will be outnumbered by people in the east. With your local staff, you all go out there and they can tell you the same thing I am. We don't need people in DC voting on something that is ours because we take care of it. Enough with the wilderness; I will appeal it if it happens. We're using it and if you get wilderness in there it will grow. You are closing opportunities that we established in this community. We need the area back, not more taken away. We depended on mining, timber, and agriculture and we need it back.

C: How will Representative Walden's proposed Bill affect the alternatives? Your Alternative E - will it revert back to Alternative A if his Bill goes through?

R: I'm not familiar with the whole bill but we are subject to the laws of the United States if it goes through. I think he's looking for travel management decisions in the future that would have to be worked on between the FS and the counties. And it would require concurrence from the counties. This goes back to a site-specific decision, so not sure it would change the forest plan, only the implementation.

Q: Are the maps here tonight available online?

R: Yes.

Q: You've done a good job of disarming us and making a great presentation. But where we started a few years ago, it's all well mapped now, but the locations of towns and areas aren't quite clear. There is still large confusion of what the yellow areas of the wilderness around Halfway mean, etc. I see you've gone through a lot of work but still our questions from two years ago remain. We're not quite sure where you're going but you've opened the possibility to go wherever you want. You state on the website that there will be plenty of notification of any changes. Couldn't find some notifications on the website a year ago, and I want to make sure that doesn't continue. Need specific notification and direction. It's sad that the effort you've gone to and people you've brought, there's not much progress in making clarification or answering questions. This is just a way of going around what we expressed

two years ago. Was hoping that at this point we would be somewhere where there would be more explanation of your intent but now things are more clouded than ever.

Q: I'm afraid we aren't going to be able to understand these documents until we implement them. I'm not going to be able to read them because I don't understand a lot of the terminology, new wording, etc. I feel we're starting to have a lack of trust of our government because we don't know what we're getting into.

R: I understand that. And there are some who may not want to invest the time to read the DEIS. One thing you should be encouraged about: we delivered 14 copies of the DEIS to the Baker County NRAC and that committee will forage through it, so if you have general concerns or on something you might read elsewhere, talk to the members of NRAC or county commissioners and tee that issue up to make sure they're looking at what you're concerned about. There are multiple ways to comment on and understand the document. The commissioners in the involved counties are taking this very seriously and they're going to do the job for you. Resources are available. Folks from the FS also who would be happy to get with you and answer your questions.

C: There is very little brown on the map (general forest). It's all green here or proposed to be green. This takes up a lot of area and it doesn't show here. Wilderness areas we can't use, but someday you won't be young anymore either and you will want to be able to walk and ride a horse out there. Give us guys that are already over the hill the opportunity to still use it other than locking us out. If we're not 20 years old we can't go there. I worked for FS for 35 years, and wilderness is like a cancer that keeps growing.

Q: I requested a few copies of these documents for City Hall and was told there are copies at the library. City Hall has more open hours than the library so can we have hard copies?

R: Absolutely, please take them with you tonight.

Q: I am commenting on the roads that are closed below the forest, just before you get up to forest boundary. The FS tank traps all the little ones. All the older people, we can't get past them or to the points where we used to go without our vehicles. We can't hunt or get to mushrooms and you keep closing lower roads.

R: If they're closed, they are closed by site-specific decisions and not by the forest plan. Often times, closures are for conditions of the roads or to control access to benefit wildlife habitats. Most road closures in this area of the Whitman Ranger District are associated with sales, because we opened them up specifically to get timber out in the last three years. Previous to that, we would decommission a road because there were duplicate roads in a certain distance or along streams. Suggest you talk to Jeff Tomac on the specifics.

Q: How would you rate the health of our forest?

R: Maybe a 3 out of 10; it depends on the aspect you are talking about. We need to do vegetation treatments. We have over-stocked forests that are threatening private land owners and the adjacent forests. That's the purpose and need for projects, and one primary purpose is fuel reduction. We're over-stocked and we need to work towards creating a more resilient ecosystem.

Q: Does that mean you will loosen the restrictions on what we can cut for firewood? We can't get into where the deadwood is because of roads not being open.

R: We are working on the Whitman District and throughout the forest to improve accessibility for wood users. Open it up so folks can get in to cut firewood, also looking at specifically identifying areas for firewood cutters - we might go in and mark it so you're not taking commercial trees. We have made significant progress in making more areas available and we continue to improve. We will also put cut stacks available for people to collect from without having to cut trees down yourself.

C: Instead of designating small areas where we can cut wood you should save some effort and just tell us where we can't.

C: I was on the Hells Canyon Preservation Board and now on the council. I noticed in the handout on the issues you heard about, the issue you said about climate change or global warming wasn't included as an issue. It's the most important issue that we will face as people and as a forest. We've already seen an escalation of the effects and it's continuing to get worse, whether you agree with the science or not. I want to see it addressed to a greater extent.

Q: I got a newspaper clipping from a miner in Ontario that says there are two more meetings, one in Clarkston and one in Ontario, but they don't know where they will be. The newspapers didn't tell the folks where the meetings will be.

R: The Ontario meeting is at the Four Rivers Cultural Center and WWCC Clarkston campus in Clarkston. We have the information available at the sign-in table.

C: This is so sad because this has been going on for so long and it's heartbreaking. Want you to know I appreciate your three goals and trying to balance those different interests and how difficult it is. I believe absolute power corrupts absolutely, and this process is the exact opposite of a closed process. No matter how we feel we have an opportunity to engage and provide input. I don't want you to think that everyone here thinks there should be no government, because there are lots of governments that are way worse than ours.

Q/C: I compliment you on your picture process, but I want you to include some pictures of the wilderness as they really are, which are the worst fire traps we have. On one side of your road you have pristine condition and across the road is wilderness. When you talk about more wilderness, I

want people to know what it looks like. You can't get a wilderness to fight a fire, because we no longer have roads so fighting fire will get more expensive. We are running out of maintenance money. Ask your leader for the State of Oregon to make his decision soon on the comment period extension – we need more time to work with it. You've had 5 years to review it and we only have 90 days to review it.

R: I feel it's safe to say there will be an extension, and the decision will be announced soon.

Q: Wood size and species – why do we have 24 inch limit and we can't cut pine? If it's there and down and it's dead – why can't we cut it for firewood?

R: Down and dead wood is important for wildlife habitat. The bigger logs and the pine last a long time on the landscape. That's why those size and species limits were put in, to meet the requirements for the snags and down trees across the landscape. We want to keep bugs and things that eat bugs. Jeff will speak to those forest-specific analyses for firewood. The details of that should go to the district ranger.

Q: I'm still stuck on the amendments – explain the process involved in amending a forest plan and is it a legal and public process?

R: It's done through NEPA, so for instance in the Snow Basin analysis, a decision was made that in order to accomplish the project we needed to cut trees more than 21 inches in diameter. This proposal is published and folks get to comment on whether we should allow that amendment in order to do that project. We can also amend the plan at a broad scale, which is what happened with the 21 inch rule across the eastside of the Cascades. Amended all those plans for that. We can have across the forest amendments, or amendments tied to a specific project. Both of these have specific public processes.

Q: When you were here last spring, you spoke about phase 3 on the handouts then (travel management). I'm concerned about winter activities like snowmobiling. Do you have more information now than you did then?

R: I still don't have information because we are waiting on DC to make a decision. We've put off regulations for how we plan for over snow travel. The courts ruled that the FS had to do it sooner than planned. We expect to get a set of directives from WO by October 2015 telling us how to address over snow travel. Then we will get a plan and talk to the public about how that might happen. They are currently writing the policy, but we won't see it for another 1.5 years. It's connected to the travel management rule so, again, it is site-specific.

Q: Regarding amendments – every 15 years we have to change this plan. You say it's cluttered, but isn't it up to date? You've been keeping the plan up to date with the amendments. I don't understand how we spend this much money putting out a new plan when we can just amend again.

R: To incorporate all the new conditions and other changes there would need to be a lot more amendments. We want to design this for the conditions we want. Unlike the 1990 plan, this one focuses on desired conditions and has more flexibility built in for how we do things. 1990 plan would require us to continue to amend on a project by project basis but the new plan gives us more flexibility to start with.

C: It just seems strange that you've been working on the same plan since 1990 and supposedly keeping it up, so there shouldn't be so many changes.

R: Amendments are for a specific reason and don't change everything. So the new plan will incorporate what we've not included so far.