**Minutes**

**Crook County Natural Resources Committee**

**June 12, 2024**

**Committee Members Present:** Bill McCormack, Frank Porfily, Mike Lunn, Kim Vogel, Lynne Breese, Cliff Kiser, Melinda Kestler, Andy Gallagher, Calista Songstad, Tim Deboodt, Steve McGuire

**Members Absent:**  Casey Kaiser

**Guests Present:** Nick Weber (BLM), Cari Taylor (BLM), Shane Jeffries (FS), Susie Hermrick (Crook County Commissioner)

**Public Present:** Phil Hartzell, Brenda Hartzell, John Breese

**Meeting was called to order** at 1:00 p.m. by Chair Steve McGuire

**Pledge of Allegiance**

**Minutes:** Bill McCormack moved to approve the minutes of the May 8, 2024 meeting as presented. Cliff Kiser seconded. Motion Passed.

**Agency Updates:**

**State Parks: No Report**

**Forest Service: Shane Jeffries**, Forest Supervisor, Ochoco National Forest was present to share the update for the Ochoco National Forest. The Forest has been focused on getting ready for fire season. Shane reported that the staff from the State BLM and Region 6 Forest Service offices came to central Oregon to look at fire readiness. This review is conducted every 3 to 5 years. Shane also shared that guard school for new hires is coming up soon. There have been several small fires on the forest and grasslands. All fires were caught early and burned less than an acre each. The vegetation at the lower elevations is drying out with upper elevations still having growing. Shane reported that Alex Robertson (former Ochoco Forest Fire Director) has been the acting Director at the national level and will soon be the permanent fire Director for the Region. Alex is credited with his vision for upgrading the Lamonta facility.

Shane shared with the group that the original objection hearings for the Mill Creek Vegetation Management Plan, scheduled for mid-May, had been postponed and are now scheduled to occur June 27th. The County is participating in the Objection hearing. Shane indicated that the draft EA for the North Fork Crooked River Vegetation Management Plan is due out sometime this summer.

Lynne asked Shane about the recent article shared by Tim that looked at the use of “let burn wildfire policy” and the Chief of the Forest Service response. Shane shared some of the history around the policy and that where the policy works (case by case) it is a good tool. Shane shared as an example, the West Bend Project, which has been prepared (vegetation treatments), with jackpot burning and broadcast prescribed burns is now set up for low risk, reoccurring fire.

Lynne asked about the juniper treatments associated with the Lower Bridge fuels reduction project. Shane responded that the FS is working with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, using tools such as chainsaws, to accomplish the vegetation goals in the area.

Frank asked if the Lamonta facility upgrades will accommodate housing? Shane said there would be no housing associated with this upgrade, it is just a training facility. Frank asked about seasonal hires and if hiring goals were met and Shane responded that the FS was very close to hiring for all needs.

Kim shared that the West Bend Project sounded very much like the Mill Creek Vegetation project. She asked Shane what type of objections the Bend project had received. Shane said the Bend project was implemented years ago and that there was limited objection with the original plan. It was a different time with concerns around smoke and recreational impacts along with reducing fire risk. The Awbrey Hall fire was a marking point to current fire management policy. Cliff mentioned the impact of the Hash Rock Fire and how it changed the landscape.

**BLM report was given by Nick Weber**, Assistant Field Office Manager. Nick reported similar fire preparedness activity to what the FS was doing. No other District wide activities were reported on.

**Agenda: Camp Creek Area grazing permit renewal**

Nick Weber introduced Cari Taylor, BLM Range Specialist to talk about the EA and draft Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the renewal of the Camp Creek Community, Bennett Field, Dry Lake, Flat Top Butte, Butler, Paulina Creek and Rabbit Valley grazing allotments. Cari shared that this decision affected 7 allotments and 3 permittees. The goal of the document was to continue improvement or improve vegetation conditions through the use of flexible grazing prescriptions, changing some timing of use and the implementation of some range improvement practices. In order to accomplish this, BLM needs to complete an EA in order to make the necessary changes. Scoping for this EA was done in February, 2024 and the draft EA was released in late May, 2024. Public comment period ends June 28, 2024. Projects associated with its adoption include some fence relocation and water developments with AUM’s remaining unchanged. Permit renewal will be for 10 years.

The draft EA reviewed 4 alternatives.

1. No Action This alternative would be status quo, no changes, no improvements
2. Grazing changes Includes changes in season of use, and proposed improvements
3. Same as Alt 2 except it would rest 1 pasture for 10 years
4. No grazing

For the signing of the decision notice, Kyle Hensley, Area Manager will sign.

Group discussion focused on Alternative 3 and the need to rest the pasture for 10 years. Rest is being proposed because the riparian habitat is not recovering at an acceptable rate of time. Mike Lunn asked if a PFC (Proper Function and Condition) survey had been done and what was the findings? Cari reported that the most current PFC assessment showed the south fork Crooked River was not at PFC nor was it trending towards PFC. No cause was identified. Mike said this needs to be addressed.

The group asked questions about what was happening. Susan Hermrick (County Commissioner) asked about the population of wild horses in the Allotment. Cari responded that the BLM does not have an official count of this group (Ligget Table HMA). The impact of horses for this EA was not analyzed and that BLM wants to do an updated EA for this in the future. BLM did not want to tie up any permit renewal action with possible litigation with management decisions on the horse issue. BLM speculated that winter use of this area by horses is very high. Existing management plan for the Liggett Table HMA calls for a population of 10 – 15 horses. Recent survey counts put the current population at over 100 head. Cliff pointed out that AUM use by horses now (year round) is significant and should not be overlooked.

Cliff asked if there was an alternative that looked at just fencing the south fork Crooked River and avoiding resting the entire pasture. Unusable AUMs during the 10 year rest period is 101 AUMs per year. Cliff also asked if the Alternative 3 provided for making up the 101 AUMs through flexibility in how other pastures are used. Cari said that there was no review of just a riparian corridor fence or flexibility in other pastures making up for the lost 101 AUMs. Propose range improvements will not make any additional forage available (no increase in AUMs).

The group then discussed the management objectives of Alt 3 and does it include monitoring to determine if objectives are being met (progress towards) during the 10 year rest period. How will the BLM know if it is working? And what are the triggers for returning livestock grazing (re-introduce) at the end of the 10 year period?

Melinda raised questions about the wild horse herd. In discussing current population estimates, the question of wild horses versus “released” horses was talked about. Melinda suggested to the BLM that there are organizations that can help with determine linage of horses, a necessary step in addressing management needs. The permittee (Phil and Brenda Hartzell) indicated they had made offers to BLM to assist with gatherings, transport to the Burns holding facility and then the return of the horses to the range if BLM would sterilize them. Cari stated that a current EA is needed in order to do anything with the horses.

The group discussed the benefits of grazing for wild fire prevention and control The South Fork Crooked River pasture is a spring use only pasture (3 weeks). Alternative 2 proposes grazing use from April 1 to May 1. The group questioned whether or not the Camp Creek Community Allotment could be dropped from this EA until more data about the causes of riparian condition could be determined and different grazing options explored. Pulling the horse issue from the EA doesn’t solve the problem or appropriately address the impacts. Livestock grazing is penalized while not part of the problem. Cari noted that the permittee is currently in compliance with their permit. Trespass use by non-permitted livestock (not current permittee’s livestock) and horse use are speculated to be significant issues impacting riparian conditions.

Melinda pointed out that the County’s Natural Resource Plan addresses these issues. She stated that the NRAC needs to respond during this public comment period and due to the time constraint, a sub-committee should be appointed to develop a draft letter for County review and possible adoption. The permittee stated he was worried because the last permit renewal process was 24 years ago and if this plan calls for 10 years of rest, will the permit be renewed in 10 years or ???

Kim moved to create a subcommittee for the purpose of reviewing the draft EA and drafting a letter for the County Commission to review and possibly adopt at their June 20th meeting. Melinda seconded. Motion passed. Kim Vogel, Melinda Kestler, Cliff Kiser and Brenda Hartzell (citizen member) were appointed by Chair Steve McGuire. Kim will chair the subcommittee. Tim will assist the group.

BLM handout is attached to these minutes.

**Good of the Order:**

Kim asked Shane how public information officers were used in the FS. Kim wondered if they were used on ID teams? Are they used to help inform the ID teams how decisions/information impacts people? Are they used for more than telling the public what the Agencies are doing?

Tim reminded the group of the field trip to the Ochoco’s on June 18th. The Field trip, sponsored by the Ochoco Forest Resources Collaborative will look at impacts of beaver reintroductions, the impact of beaver dam analogs and Stage Zero restoration activities. 8 committee members indicated they would be attending, Kim, Steve, Frank, Calista and her son, Mike, Cliff, Andy and Melinda.

**Public Comment**: none

Cliff moved to adjourn. Bill Seconded. Motion passed. Meeting adjourned at 2:50 p.m.