

Minutes

Crook County Natural Resources Committee

March 12, 2025

Committee Members Present: Bill McCormack, Frank Porfily, Mike Lunn, Lynne Breese, Calista Songstad, Tim Deboodt, Melinda Kestler, Andy Gallagher, Kim Vogel (via Zoom), Cliff Kiser

Members Absent: Casey Kaiser, Steve McGuire

Guests Present: Slater Turner (FS), Scott McFarland (FS), Holly Jewkes (FS), Kevin Larkin (FS) Lisa Clark (BLM), Jodie Barram (OLWF), Susie Hermreck (County Commissioner)

Public Present: Scott Johnson (Central Oregon Rancher), John Breese, Gayle Hunt, Mikayla Mills, Reese Mercer, Kathleen Curtis, Mike Ervin

Meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by vice-Chair Lynne Breese

Pledge of Allegiance

Minutes: Bill McCormack moved to approve the draft meeting minutes from 2/12/2025. Frank seconded. All present voted yes, no No votes, no abstentions.

Mike Lunn moved to approve the draft minutes of the special meeting 3/3/2025. Andy seconded. All present voted yes, no No votes, no abstentions.

Agency Updates: Slater Turner provided the Forest Service updates. Slater introduced interim Ochoco National Forest Co-Supervisors Holly Jewkes and Kevin Larking. Holly is currently the Forest Supervisor on the Deschutes National Forest, Kevin is Deputy Forest Supervisor, also on the Deschutes National Forest. Holly provided some information about her background and shared that there is a long history of the two Forests working together. The current model of interim leadership on Forests is being used throughout Region 6 as the change in Federal Administration is occurring and hiring decisions are being made. Holly shared that there are no current changes in Forest priorities being proposed during this interim leadership change. Fire Rehab, timber, grazing and planning are all the same.

Mike Lunn asked if during this interim period, are there discussions occurring regarding the consolidation of the Ochoco and Deschutes National Forests. Holly shared that there were no conversations occurring and that the shared leadership is just interim. Lynne asked about the loss of employees during the last 2 months was having an impact on workloads. Holly shared that the FS is still working through the staffing changes and that the outlook changes every day. John Breese asked if there was any impact on hiring fire fighters. Slater shared that fire hires are on-going and able to move forward. Mike asked from the Committee's work, who should be the point of contact for the Forest. Holly said the Committee can reach out to her or Kevin and that Slater and Scott are always available as well.

Kim Vogel asked if the Executive order to increase timber production was impacting Forest operations. She asked about any modifications to the Mill Creek Vegetation Management Plan with NEPA being recently completed. Holly said that as a Region, Region 6 was just beginning to have conversations about implementation on the ground. From the Region, there is no plan yet. Slater said that specific to the Mill Creek project, there is no plan to modify the projects within the Decision notice. One sale has already occurred and another is planned for 2026. Kim asked about FS working with industry to work with markets, labor and mills. Slater responded that he is in contact with AFRC (American Forest Resource Council, an industry organization) to see what additional management tools are available to accomplish timber harvest goals and to better understand what the market will bear. Kevin supported Slater's comments, adding that at the Regional level, the FS is taking a regional market approach. Within the Executive Orders, there are benchmark deadlines and the Forest is working to meet those deadlines.

Cliff Kiser expressed concern that over the last 2 – 3 decades the industry has experienced a significant loss of infrastructure including mill closures, harvest businesses no longer exist and skill labor has been lost. Cliff also expressed concern with the Forest's use of minimum bid when trying to sell timber, particularly timber associated with wildfire mitigation and fighting activities. Many times Cliff shared, sales are voided because minimum bid levels were higher than markets supported.

Mike Lunn asked about the changes in CEQ (Council on Environmental Quality) regulations on NEPA and the broader use of Categorical Exclusions (CE). Holly shared that the FS can now use CE's from other Federal Agencies as long as they are pertinent. Current fire salvage work on the Ochoco's is doing this with some BLM CEs.

BLM updates were provided by Lisa Clark, Deschutes Area Manager, Prineville BLM District. Lisa shared that fence work is occurring on the Alfalfa Market Rd. Changes in County Road maintenance and removal of cattle guards, new fence is important to keep livestock off the road. BLM is working to address issues related to OHV parking at 4 Corners. Gates with locks used to control vehicle traffic continue to be vandalized. BLM is working with permittees on Bear Creek Rd to repair fences that have been a part of long-term enclosures in the area.

A new firewood cutting area is now open along Millican Rd. This new area is south of 4 Corners and the 8th such area the BLM has made available for this purpose.

Lisa shared that the Hidden Canyon Resort (approved in 2007 and located on the south slopes of Powell Butte) is beginning to move forward with development. Right of ways have been approved and issued and development will start with an initial 160 acres. This work triggers mitigation work agreed to in 2007. Impacts to public lands will include new horse trails, OHV access to Millican OHV trail systems, hiking/biking trails to Powell Butte. Lisa pointed out that any recreational development done will be open to the public and any commercial activity will be a recreational permit. Cliff asked if the proposed solar development areas outlined in the Programmatic BLM Solar Plan will conflict with this development? Lisa said that there are no public lands that are near this development that have been identified for large scale, commercial solar development.

In regards to the newly adopted Programmatic Solar Plan, Lisa said there are 3 projects that have been identified for central Oregon. BLM is currently initiating NEPA on 1 project between Redmond and Bend, another in LaPine and one near Powell Butte. The Powell Butte site has not been approved for the initiation of NEPA.

Lisa shared that the BLM has signed a Decision notice for the Crazy Creek Fire Salvage. BLM is hoping the sale will occur in mid-March. BLM is working with permittees in the affected fire areas for grazing requirements post-fire. BLM is working on the options for virtual fencing to use partial allotments as the technology and conditions allow. BLM is also working on a communication permit by the City of Prineville for the Grizzly Mt communication site.

BLM changes in BLM staffing, Lisa shared that the workload prioritization is not changing. Timber, grazing, fire/fuels, recreation and mining are still the workload. Work focus will start to look at the north side of Grizzly Mtn, where fuel loads are high, fire risk is elevated and the importance of the communication site on the top and the need to protect this infrastructure.

In closing, Lisa shared that there is a hiring freeze for seasonals. BLM just recently received authorization to hire 4 seasonals (botany, archeology, ranger and recreation). Normally, the Prineville District would be hiring 20 seasonals. Lisa also shared that currently they have hired 18 seasonal for fire, 25 is the norm. BLM has rental space for 12 seasonals. BLM has rented local housing for this purpose.

No report from Oregon State Parks

Agenda Items:

Wiley Flat Fire Scoping letter was introduced by Slater Turner, District Ranger, Ochoco National Forest. Scoping proposes the hazard tree removal of approximately 900 acres impacted by the Wiley Flat Fire (summer, 2025). Work will focus on road areas impacted by the fire. Approximately 100' – 150' on either side of the road depending on slope. Slater emphasized that work must be done within a year in order to avoid significant loss in market value of the wood. Scoping letter was released on March 4, 2025 and closes March 20, 2025. Decision notice will follow with work authorized to begin in May, 2025. In November, 2024, FS meet with AFRC to ask what is viable. After a review, in December, industry made recommendations for opportunities within pine dominated sites. It was stressed by industry that work in these sites needs to be done very soon. It was pointed out that salvage work in other sites (other tree species) may be salvaged later. Slater indicated that the FS is still waiting to hear if BOR funds will be available for fire recovery costs.

Mike asked by tree heights were being used instead of a measured distance from road side? Slater said that the FS is trying to make as much flexibility is built into the Decision and the use of tree heights in fire mitigation/salvage is consistent with the Forest's "Hazard Tree" guide.

Cliff expressed concern with the lack of aggressiveness in fuels/thinning work. He pointed out that much of the area impacted by the Wiley Flat fire had tree densities exceeding 300 trees/ac. greater than 8" dbh. Historical stocking rates were 20 – 30 trees/ac. Over the last 30 years, tree density has risen

greatly due to reduced timber management activities. Cliff estimated that tree mortality due to the fire was nearly 75%. Cliff asked if there was any ideas on how to quicken pace and scale of fuels work? Holly shared that she was in agreement with Cliff's concerns and now with economic challenges of markets, workforce (public and private) and mills that there was no easy answer. Kim Vogel challenged the FS administration at the Regional and National level to get more aggressive.

Slater pointed out that in the scoping, tree size limitations are not a part of the proposal. Susie Hermreck, Crook County Commissioner shared conversations from the Ochoco Forest Restoration Collaborative (OFRC) and the desire of the environmental representative on that Collaborative argue that cutting trees damages forests.

Melinda Kestler asked Susie if the County would use the Coordination tool as a method to assist with forest work. Susie said yes!

Committee Appointments: Tim announced that the Board of Commissioners had reappointed Cliff Kiser to a 4 year term, ending December 31, 2028.

By-Law review: As a result of the discussion during the special meeting of the Committee on March 3, 2025, a review of the Committee's By-laws in regards to Committee size was introduced by Tim. Current by-laws limit Committee size to 9 – 11 members. To being discussion, Melinda Kestler moved to make no changes to current by-laws in regards to size of the Committee. Calista seconded the motion. Mike started discussion by stating that the current pool of applicants had 2, great applicants. Each candidate had unique and strong backgrounds that would have been useful to have represented on the Committee. Susie shared that the County's Planning Commission uses a "pro-tem" position to provide exposure to planning committee work to individuals interested in serving on the planning commission. With a vacancy, the Commission and County can appoint the pro-tem position to membership on the planning commission. Kim said that she felt there were many positives to allowing for increased Committee size depending on applicant qualifications. Vote was taken. Breese, McCormack, Kestler, Lunn, Gallagher, Kiser, Songstad, Porfily voted YES. Vogel voted no. No abstentions.

Public Comment: Mike Ervin asked how we manage for increased logging. The Stewardship program is good for the Company who gets the Stewardship contract but is not good for others. It locks up sales for years, not giving others (smaller businesses) the opportunity to get work. In order to work, they have to be sub-contractors under the Contract holder. The Good Neighbor Policy is another mechanism that can be expanded. This program allows FS to work with Oregon Department of Forestry in completing sale work.

Melinda asked what can be done to award small projects to small mills/logger businesses? Slater responded that they can use service contracts. Holly shared that there are a lot of tools but each one has its nuances that have to be dealt with. Scott McFarlane shared that they have used a small scale program in the past with some success. Cliff asked what about selling fire log decks in smaller quantities or sort decks by species. Scott said they tried selling a few small decks created during the Rail Ridge and Crazy Creek fires and they went no sale. Cliff wondered if it went no-sale due to the minimum

bid being set too high. Slater shared that the challenge for central Oregon log sales is now transportation. A green tree sale in Mill Creek went for minimum bid only.

Reece Mercer, with Western Beavers Cooperative introduced herself and her program. Western Beavers Cooperative works with landowners and agencies to use beavers for landscape improvement. Currently working with the Crooked River Watershed Council, WBC is conducting of survey of riparian areas throughout the County, assessing current conditions which will lead to possible future releases of beaver. Work scheduled for this coming summer, 2025 is to complete steam surveys looking for presence/absence of beaver and riparian condition. Assessments will lead to the development of an action plan. Reece will be added to an upcoming Committee meeting for a more in-depth introduction to the group and their activities.

Mike Lunn moved to adjourn. Cliff seconded. All members voted yes. No nays, no abstentions.

Meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Crook County NRAC Updates

March 12, 2024

Hohstein-Totti Fence replacement: the Deschutes Field Office completed the NEPA to install a new fence along Alfalfa Market/Reservoir Road just west of the Alfalfa Curves staging area. Access was originally managed by cattleguards; however, the county removed those. The fence is needed to keep livestock from entering the roadway. The permittee has offered to build the fence once the NEPA is completed.

Millican cattleguard repair: one of the cattleguards along Millican Road was at grade with insufficient depth and frequently flooded. BLM road crew staff were able to lift the cattleguard, build up the base beneath it and hopefully elevate it above high-water level.

Four-corners gate: continues to be an issue. The corner is no longer the OHV access point, and 4-Corners staging area is approximately ¼ mile east of the intersection. The lock is repeatedly getting cut and the gates left open – assuming for people partying and not OHV users as we have added signs directing people to the appropriate staging area.

Bear Creek – repaired the existing exclosures and are continuing to work with the permittee on the best season of use for current grazing, as well as a plan for long-term improvements that could include modifying the exclosure, providing off-stream water, willow planting, etc.

Riparian restoration – the office recently had a planning meeting with Oregon Dept of Fish and Wildlife to provide the program of work for riparian restoration. Proposed project areas include creeks off of the Paulina valley, the Camp creek area, the south fork Crooked, 12-mile table, and Bear Creek. The range of work discussed includes fire restoration, thinning, willow planting, exclosure development, bank restoration, etc.

Millican-Williamson juniper thinning/firewood area – the district fuels program recently funded the contract to cut the juniper in the 8th unit for this project. Once on the ground, the material will be available for firewood collection with a permit, and the area is generally open June 1 until November or until the material is gone.

RMG/Hidden Canyon Resort – the office has started initial discussions with Hidden Canyon Resort and Brasada to expand recreation options that would also be open to the public. The groups are interested in developing horse trails south of Brasada, an OHV connection from Hidden Canyon into the Millican OHV trail system, and potentially hiking and/or mountain biking routes up into the Powell Butte area. As this is primarily new construction, this would require an environmental assessment and would include public outreach and involvement. If approved, as commercial ventures, the resorts would need to obtain special recreation permits; however, the public would be able to use the trail systems without charge. Access to the Buttes would be provided via a public trailhead within Hidden Canyon.

The Crazy Creek Salvage Decision was signed and is expected to go out to bid on 3/18.

Juniper thinning is planned for High Desert Shrub Steppe EA units in the Congleton Hollow/Paulina Valley area to benefit Greater Sage-grouse.

For the City of Prineville Communication Site renewal, the office is in consultation with our tribal partners to start, before working to process the city's application.

Following last summer's wildfires, we're working with our permittees where we need to have grazing closures. We've met with permittees and have completed agreements. In addition, most have been interested in utilizing Vence (e-collars) to make grazing an option when small portions of BLM are in with their larger private lands.

The Central Oregon Field Office is still waiting for the Biological Opinion for the Murderers Creek Joint Management Plan, which would allow both agencies to complete decisions on the plan. At this point, we anticipate being able to sign in the next 30 days.