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Forest Service tries again on Blue Mountains plan

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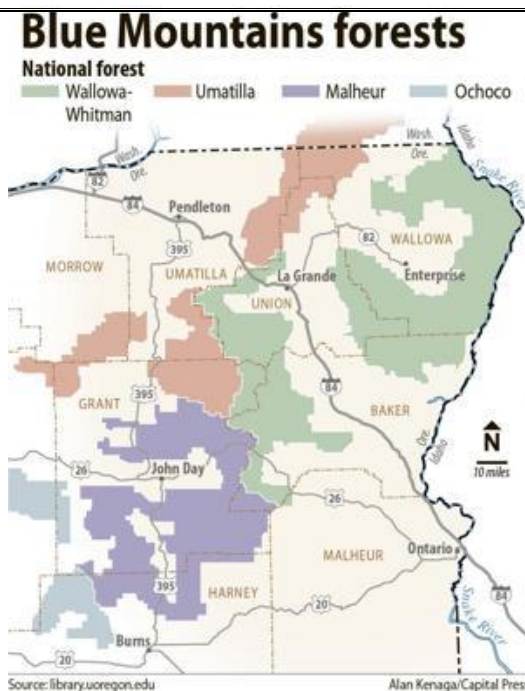
PENDLETON — After taking a step back this spring from updating the long-term management plans for the three national forests in the Blue Mountains after 15 years of trying, the U.S. Forest Service is ready to move forward again.

And this time, the agency is taking extra steps to try and resolve deep-rooted concerns of residents, industry and environmental groups.

The Blues Intergovernmental Council has been formed to help frame the process of developing a new methodology for forest planning for the Wallowa-Whitman, Malheur and Umatilla national forests. A series of meetings between county commissioners and key Forest Service personnel have been held across the Blue Mountain region over the past year to help kick-start a framework for cross-jurisdiction work.

“The underlying intent is to ensure that we can develop plans for the three national forests that would provide the opportunity for durable relationships with our communities and to make an important difference on the landscape for the long term,” said Eric Watrud, the forest supervisor on the Umatilla National Forest.

The three forest plans — which together total more than 5,000 pages — contain guidelines for everything from grazing and timber harvest to wilderness protections.



Forest plans are due to be revised every 10 to 15 years to account for changes in the landscape and to keep up with the latest science. The current Blue Mountains forest plans, which were last updated in 1990, remain in effect.

“The 1990 plan is continuing to work, but this is an opportunity to update something that was developed very well, but almost 30 years ago, and to bring that literally into the 21st century,” Watrud said.

Watrud said the council includes state and county representatives in Oregon and Washington, four treaty tribes and regulatory agencies, in addition to the Forest Service.

“(The BIC) is specifically just Eastern Oregon counties with the Forest Service co-convening, because we’re the ones that work together to come up with this process, and we’re inviting the Washington counties that are affected by the Blue Mountains and government agencies that are affected by the Blue Mountain Plan, said Mark Owens, a Harney County Commissioner and a member of the BIC.

Both Watrud and Owens are hopeful the BIC will allow for more collaboration between agencies and more input from residents, something they believe was lacking in other drafts of the forest plans.

“(Residents will) actually have more of an opportunity being able to work with their county commissioners because the county commissioners will understand in real time the plan development and everything will be transparent,” Owens said. “The county commissioners can then share that with our constituents. We can take advice from our constituents and we can bring it to the monthly meetings.”

Owens said other efforts to get input from governmental agencies and take public comment from residents seemed to be like a game of “telephone,” where once a comment was made and went through the various channels, it was never the same at the end of the process.

“I believe having a forum where we can all work together monthly, review how the plan is being created and designed that we will have an informed consent,” Owens said. “We are not going to get consensus on every aspect of the plan, but I think we will end up with a plan that our communities can support and work with.”

Watrud said the BIC meetings, which will start in December, are intended to be as inclusive as possible.

“The attempt here is to create just a more open, inclusive approach where the Forest Service is working closely with our communities in order to make sure that we are developing a plan that is gonna stand the test of time,” he said. “We have the responsibility of stewarding the management of these three national forests, which are a national and local treasure. And so there’s a tremendous amount of interest, and our intent is to make sure that we’re incorporating that feedback, incorporating those ideas and local suggestions in order to make sure that we accomplish that goal.”

Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa announced in March 2019 that the Forest Service was scrapping the proposed Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision, which includes the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur. A final draft of the plans had been released in June 2018. It was not the first time the Blue Mountain Forest Plan had been paused.

A draft version of the plans was completed in 2014, and received so much backlash that local forest supervisors decided to develop new plan alternatives.

Owens said after so many stops and starts in developing cohesive forest plans, he’s optimistic that this is the time to finally get the process right.

“I believe this is a great opportunity to hopefully redesign how land management plans are done. Figuring out how to include more public participation and more transparency,” he said. “I’m excited. I don’t feel that this process had been done before and that partnering with the Forest Service and making sure our public voices are heard I believe we’ll be successful in having a plan that can meet the social, economic and ecological needs of our communities in the forest.”

Source: https://www.eastoregonian.com/news/local/forest-service-tries-again-on-blue-mountains-plan/article_669bb33a-0f06-11ea-b9a0-9312747adfc6.html