

Forest Service hosts trail users

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Last week, the U.S. Forest Service hosted a meeting of the Sisters Trail Users Group (S-TUG).

According to S-TUG's mission statement, the group's periodic meetings are designed to "bring together a diverse array of trail enthusiasts from Sisters and the surrounding communities ... to communicate, coordinate, and collaborate on any trail planning management topics of interest..."

The "trail enthusiasts" were represented by S-TUG members that include hikers, bicyclists, equestrians and snowmobilers. Some of the trail groups represented at the meeting are actively involved in volunteering to maintain trails and include the Sisters Trails Alliance (STA), Back Country Horsemen, Friends of the Metolius, Central Oregon Trails Alliance, and others.

The meeting was organized and chaired by Amy Racki, recreation team leader for the Sisters Ranger District, who gave an extensive trails update for 2016. Her presentation was followed by open discussions among the S-TUG attendees.

One of the top priorities discussed at the meeting included measures to

minimize potential user conflicts, such as cyclist and horse, or snowmobile and Nordic skiers. Proposed methods would include additional signing or separation of uses on trails.

S-TUG provides a forum for discussion of such issues and also a framework for aiding in resolution. The Forest Service's position is, when the varied forest and trail users become more familiar with other users and their concerns, that those concerns and potential conflicts can be more readily resolved.

Former Forest Service employee and group participant Maret Pajutee pointed out that use by individuals in the Three Sisters Wilderness has doubled in just the past year from 30,000 users to 60,000. As a result of such increasing user impact, which is expected to continue to grow, the proactive efforts of S-TUG and others will become even more important in the years ahead.

Another topic of interest was expressed by bicycle trail users who would like to see more cycling opportunities beyond the Peterson Ridge trail system. Some concerns were also expressed about ATV incursions occurring on trails, and wilderness intrusions by snowmobilers in the vast open spaces created by the Pole Creek Fire. These

issues will be subject to further examination.

Racki's presentation focused on big projects of the past year, as well as plans for the future. A few of the past year's many highlights included rerouting a portion of the Metolius-Windigo Trail, replacement of the Whychus Creek/1605 bridge south of town, repositioning of the Chush Falls Trailhead, the continuing Suttle Lake Trail restoration, snowmobile trail reroutes, completion of the Whychus Overlook and barrier-free trail, and the "de-designation" of the Metolius Scenic Bikeway.

Racki explained that the demise of the Metolius Bikeway's designation in no way affects anyone's ability to cycle the route, but it was felt that promoting more use of the area was counter to the goal of limiting impact to the region.

A big thank-you was also given to the STA for its role in the creation and continuing maintenance of the Whychus Overlook and barrier-free trail. Racki said the local trails



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Forest Service representative Amy Racki addresses a recent meeting of the Sisters Trail Users Group.

organization provided volunteer labor, trail signage, seed purchases, fencing, benches, and the portable restroom. STA is continuing to provide monitoring, watering of plantings, repairs, and maintenance and funding of the restroom.

Among the concerns needing attention were illegal trails, wilderness drone use, target-shooting at McKenzie Gravel Pit (see related article, page 1), trash dumping, motorized wilderness intrusions, fee tube thefts, fallen trees on roadways and trails, suspicious forest camps, ATV damage, vandalism to signage and more.

Some specific help that

the Forest Service will be needing includes volunteers for clearing trails, restocking snow shelters with firewood, resetting nordic and snowmobile poles and trail markers, support for grant funding, strict use of weed-free hay, stewardship of dispersed camping sites (especially Lower Canyon Creek), and the public's cooperation in promptly reporting violations and suspicious behavior.

Persons desiring additional information about any of these or other issues impacting the local forests are invited to contact the Sisters Ranger District at 541-549-7700.

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