

Little damage during eclipse

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OREGON PUBLIC BROADCASTING

PRINEVILLE - Patrick Lair with the U.S. Forest Service drove into the Ochoco National Forest to see how things looked after hosting thousands of eclipse visitors.

He drove the same road on Aug. 23 that more than 30,000 people took to get into the massive Symbiosis Festival on Big Summit Prairie — a patch of private land in the middle of the national forest.

“At one point, we had bumper-to-bumper traffic from the prairie out past Prineville,” he said. “I’m kind of amazed not to see more trash on the sides of the road.”

With all the festival-goers — plus additional eclipse visitors looking to camp in the path of totality —officials worried about people trampling vegetation and driving off-road through the forest. With dry conditions and late-summer heat, they were especially worried about people accidentally starting wildfires.

Anticipating up to a million eclipse visitors statewide, public land managers prepared for the worst. Now, as they survey the damage, they’re finding many of their fears of environmental destruction never came to pass.

The road into the Ochocos is littered with some discarded bottles, the occasional strand of toilet paper and several abandoned vehicles. But considering how many people traveled through here, Lair said, it’s looking really good.

“I think we all were expecting the worst, and when it didn’t happen we all were pleasantly surprised,” Lair said. “Not that there aren’t impacts — there will certainly be trash to pick up.”

Clean campgrounds, few fires

Lisa Clark with the Prineville District of the Bureau of Land Management is also along for the drive. She said her agency oversees more than a million acres of public land in Central Oregon and was prepared to see up to 500,000 visitors for the eclipse.

We stop at a large campsite in a wide-open



Thousands of tents, RVs and other shelters sit in the dusty landscape at the Symbiosis eclipse festival east of Prineville at Big Summit Prairie on Aug. 20. The weeklong festival drew people from all over the world for solar eclipse viewing.



A woman dressed as a version of Alice in Wonderland pins roses to festival attendees at the Symbiosis eclipse festival east of Prineville at Big Summit Prairie on Sunday, Aug. 20.

clearing that was full during the eclipse on Aug. 21. But there’s no evidence of all the people who were here just a couple days ago.

“It looks like someone came through and did a really nice cleanup job,” Clark said.

Federal agencies had encouraged to see visitors stopping in at their information booth in Prineville to unload extra trash they cleaned up from neighboring campsites, Clark said. She also suspects they saw less than half the number of visitors they prepared for.

She checks inside the bathroom for any hidden trash.

“It’s always good to

check inside outhouses and port-a-potties,” she said, pulling open the metal door. “I am absolutely amazed. There’s a little bit of toilet paper left and no trash. It looks clean.”

Even more amazing? Over the past week, her agency has only gotten one report of a fire that hadn’t been fully extinguished. That’s less than she’d expect to see on a normal summer weekend.

“In general, abandoned campfires and escaped campfires are our number one cause of human caused wildfires on Forest Service and BLM land,” she said. “So our expectation would have been - with just the sheer number of people we had -

somebody would have made that mistake.”

Environmental impacts?

With campgrounds filled up, another concern was the environmental impacts of dispersed camping in the forest. Finding those impacts falls to Forest Service hydrologist Rob Tanner, who leads a team of experts called a Resource Assessment and Mitigation Team.

“So this is kind the next stage — post-eclipse,” he said. “We’re calling it the RAM team.”

On Aug. 23, after giving visitors time to clear out of the woods, Tanner gathered up his team begin to assess environmental impacts in the Ochocos. The team will go to the places where they know people went off-road to camp and see if the soil, plants, waterways and wildlife were negatively impacted.

“Initially, before the eclipse, we put together a fairly large team because we just didn’t know what to expect,” he said. “We have soil scientists, archaeologists, aquatics folks — which are hydrologists and fisheries biologists — wildlife biologists, engineers looking at

the roads and a few other folks as well.”

They’ll decide where they’re most needed after reviewing aerial videos collected during the eclipse. But Tanner said they might not have a whole lot of work to do.

“We know we had less visitors than anticipated, so, we’ve kind of ratcheted back,” he said. “We don’t know exactly what’s out there, but we’re hoping less visitors equals less potential resource issues.”

On Thursday, the team found trash, abandoned vehicles, messy campsites and human waste dumped from an RV. Unpleasant? Most definitely. But overall, from the Painted Hills in Eastern Oregon to Marys Peak in the Coast Range, officials seemed to agree that public information campaigns paid off with hundreds of thousands of visitors doing very little damage to public lands.

Widespread relief

Shelly Hall, superintendent of the Painted Hills-John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, knew she had some pretty fragile ground to protect as her office fielded non-stop phone calls from people planning to visit in the

weeks leading up to the eclipse.

The National Park Service brought in incident management teams from parks around the country to help control the crowds and keep them away from sensitive areas.

While the park did get quite crowded with eclipse visitors, Hall said, there were very few problems. She credits all the extra planning and support staff.

“Everything went very very smoothly,” she said. “I’m really relieved because I was afraid I’d be sitting at this point thinking of all these horrible things that happened and none of it happened.”

There were no fires, no medical emergencies or car accidents.

“All those things we were going through — all the what-ifs during the planning,” she said. “None of those things happened.”

Jude McHugh, spokeswoman for the Willamette National Forest, said despite smoky skies and some closed areas including the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, many visitors still came to the forest to watch the eclipse from high peaks and open prairies. But they didn’t leave much behind, she said.

“There was only one escaped campfire,” she said, “indicating most visitors respected the campfire ban.”

Chris Havel with Oregon State Parks said he saw a similarly rosy picture.

“We had good crowds,” he said. “People got in and got out without any problems. Of course, there was some traffic on the way out, but overall things went surprisingly well. I was expecting a big long list of issues, but no. We’re all sort of scratching our heads, like, ‘What did we miss?’”

Hall said she doesn’t agree with people who argue that the whole event was over-hyped and that there was actually nothing to worry about.

“People say, ‘Oh, it’s like Y2K,’ and I don’t think that’s the case,” she said. “I think lots and lots of people did come, but we planned well and people behaved well. People just wanted to come and experience the eclipse, and it was a very cool experience.”

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