

PLANS

Continued from Page 1A developed very well, but almost 30 years ago, and to bring that literally into the 21st century," Watrud said.

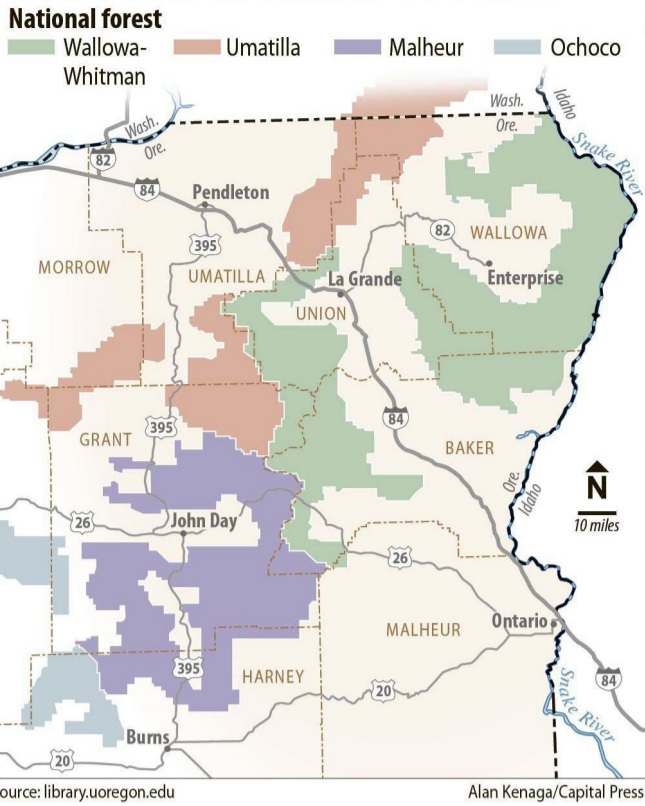
Watrud said the council includes state and county representatives in Oregon and Washington, four treaty tribes and regulatory agencies, in addition to the Forest Service.

"(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 that the BIC will allow for more collaboration between agencies and more input from residents, something the 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.

Blue Mountains forests



Source: library.uoregon.edu

Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

"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 to-

gether 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 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.

— Capital Press reporter George Plaven contributed to this report.



Dick Mason/The Observer

Biology professor Joe Corsini, right, and Eastern Oregon University students Matthew Wetzel and Erin Blincoe remove sediment Friday morning from the bones of what could be a mammoth.

REMAINS

Continued from Page 1A wish of making them available to Eastern.

The bones were 30 feet below the surface, according to an EOU news release, but only 6 inches of soil covered them when the party from EOU arrived. This meant they had to be exceedingly cautious about where they tread. EOU student Erin Blincoe noted she was surprised at one point to learn she was nearly standing on an ancient vertebrae.

"I had to be careful," she said. "I did not want to damage it."

The vertebrae were successfully removed from the site in addition to giant front-leg bones, including ulna, radius and humerus, as well as tusks and a cranium. Corsini said the animal may have been a juvenile because the ends of its long bones do not appear to be fused at the shaft.

To protect the bones found at the Prineville area site, they were packed in sediment and then covered with plaster before being transported to La Grande.

Some of the smaller bones, including teeth, may be enclosed within the larger sections that were carefully packed out. Corsini said he hopes the teeth can be found because they would help determine whether the creature is actually a mastodon rather than a mammoth. Mastodons and mastodons were similar elephant-like

creatures.

The time period the mammoth or mastodon died will be determined later by dating the age of the sediment around it through a process known as optically stimulated luminescence. The OSL dating work will be done at a Utah State University, Becker said.

The sediment samples from the dig site have not been exposed to light for thousands of years. The sediment was placed in tubes in a manner to prevent light exposure.

While EOU faculty and students don't yet know how far back in time they stepped during their dig, the magnitude of the opportunity it provided is not lost to them. Some, like EOU student Hannah Wilhelm, were students new to anthropology who found themselves thrust into a graduate level atmosphere.

"It is a cool opportunity to experience this in an intro level class," she said.

EOU student Lydia Hurty knows she might never be a part of something like again. She described it as "a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

REPORT

Continued from Page 1A medium- to high-end outdoor products, so if the economy turns sour, he said, "we definitely would feel it."

But the business has instead experienced steady growth. Blue Mountain Outfitters expanded its footprint in 2018, and while summer and winter are its best seasons for sales, this October proved strong.

"I think the thing I hear the most is a lot of people are surprised a business like ours can make it," he said.

Marketing strategy has played a key role in the operation's success.

Blue Mountain Outfitters, like so many other small businesses, has a social media presence. But the La Grande store takes a step beyond pics of the latest goods and instead puts the company's spunky attitude on full display. The store's short videos of "Gear Talk," for example, show Whitbeck and crew in action with products, such as a contest to see who can ready a sleeping bag the fastest. The videos also are sped up, giving them the feel of old-time silent film comedies.

Traditional advertising also plays a role. Whitbeck said he thinks the billboard the business rented in March on nearby Island Avenue has drawn in customer. Over the years, he said, the marketing has shifted away from reliance on tourism to a greater focus on the local scene. That's working even in the glare of online retail giants such as Amazon.

"The one thing I have to say is I never knew a world without Amazon," Whitbeck said.

To help protect against Amazon and its ilk, Blue Mountain Outfitters relies on products with price control, that is, sticking with the manufacturer's suggested retail price. That allows the Eastern Oregon store to stand on even footing with Amazon.

"The common assumption you can find something cheaper on Amazon is not quite true," he said.

Customer service also is key, he said, and the store staff aim to serve as consultants and not salespeople.

"Everything we can do for the customers, we do," Whitbeck said. "I think that helps any business, but it helps us because people come in here not knowing what they need."

But the real success, he said, comes back to what Blue Mountain can offer that Amazon cannot.

"We have a presence in the community," he said. "Amazon is not going to buy your kid's baseball jersey and stuff like that."

Baker, Grant, Harney, Malheur and Wallowa counties experienced small changes in their unemployment rates between September and October, according to the Employment Department, with most counties seeing near-record low rates for their counties' histories.

Gust Tsiatsos of La Grande said the low unemployment figure surprised him. Tsiatsos, the owner and operator GCT Land Management Inc., questioned whether all the workers lived

in the county due to the lack of local housing.

Hi company is developing two housing projects. According to the state employment figures, construction added 20 jobs since last October.

Elevation Pointe on the 400 block of 16th Street could provide jobs for a some time. The project will offer 21 condominiums and eight single-family homes for retirees and adults age 55 and older. Tsiatsos said the gated community will take three to five years to complete.

"We're going to build it out as demand is there," he said, so perhaps three houses and four or five condos a year.

The other project is a village of 10 tiny homes for veterans only on Russell Avenue. He said the project is waiting on a state grant, and when it comes through the build out should take about 12 months.

Some job sectors, according to the state report, declined. Financial jobs fell from 330 to 300, and information jobs fell from 110 to 90.

And while local government jobs rose from 1,910 last October to 1,960 this year, state and federal government jobs fell. The state dropped from 360 to 330 during the span. The number of federal jobs in the county experienced a sharp fall from 290 in September to 250 in October.

The state report also teased Union County's unemployment rate could reach the 4% range, but only the upcoming months will reveal if that bears out.

HUNGRY

Continued from Page 1A to come, maybe see their neighbors and sit down for a good meal," Jack St. Clair, a member of the Neighbors Together of Union County board, said. "I've heard nothing but positive comments."

St. Clair explained the dinner is meant for anyone who might not have the opportunity to partake in a holiday meal, including the elderly who may not want to or be able to cook, those who don't have family to share the day with or those who live with food insecurity.

A person does not have to be homeless or lack the funds for a special meal to



Sabrina Thompson/The Observer

Safeway in La Grande is participating in the Turkey Bucks program. Customers can round up their purchase to donate funds for goods for holiday meals.

take advantage of these community dinners. How-

ever, during the holiday months free meals can be

especially helpful. According to the Oregon Housing and Community Services 2019 statewide shelter study, 51 people in Union and Wallowa counties identified homeless in August. Approximately 5% were students during the 2017-18 school year, according to the Oregon Department of Education's "PreK-12 District Counts by Living Situation" report.

While some participating in these programs may not be homeless, affording special meals still can be difficult. Food pantries, including those supported by the Union County Food Bank, can help in providing some of the staple ingredients for holiday dinners.

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