

Environmentalists move toward lawsuit over fuel break plan

Bureau of Land Management planned breaks in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho and Utah

By **SCOTT SONNER**

Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — Environmentalists have filed a notice of intent to sue the U.S government to block plans to build up to 11,000 miles of fuel breaks they contend would violate the Endangered Species Act in a misguided effort to slow the advance of wildfires in six Western states.

Leaders of four conservation groups say the Bureau of Land Management’s project would be shielded from legitimate environmental review under last-minute moves by the outgoing Trump administration.

They say the fuel breaks in conjunction with proposed widespread clearcutting, herbicide spraying, grazing and prescribed fire could threaten the survival of more than 100 rare wildlife species across potentially more than 340,000 square miles of federal land — an area twice as big as New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio combined.

Fuel breaks involve clearing stretches of vegetation to slow the progress of fires.

As wide as 500 feet, the breaks are planned along



John Roark/The Idaho Post-Register via AP, File

Wynn Whitmeyer of the Idaho Falls Fire Department uses a drip can to ignite cheatgrass and tumbleweeds during a controlled burn June 11, 2020, east of Idaho Falls, Idaho. Environmentalists have filed a notice of intent to sue the U.S government to block plans to build up to 11,000 miles of fuel breaks they claim would violate the Endangered Species Act in a misguided effort to slow the advance of wildfires in six Western states.

roads and federal rights-of-way in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Idaho and Utah. If all 11,000 miles are finished, the breaks cumulatively would stretch the equivalent distance between Seattle and South Africa.

“The Trump adminis-

tration’s reckless, 11th-hour decision authorizes the bureau to use highly destructive methods to remove millions of acres of native trees and shrubs,” said Scott Lake, legal advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity in Nevada. “It’s a clear violation of the Endangered

Species Act, and we won’t allow these plans to become reality.”

Lawyers for the center, Sierra Club, Western Watersheds Project and Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance provided 60-day notice of the intent to sue the bureau in a letter Tuesday, Jan. 12.

It challenged exclusions the administration included in environmental impact statements issued in February for the fuel breaks and in November for fuels reduction and rangeland restoration.

The groups say the bureau and its parent Interior Department failed to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding impacts to threatened and endangered aquatic species as required by the act. They say the department acknowledged more than 130 protected species are found across the area, including the greater sage grouse, and adcknowledged many of the proposed methods, such as targeted grazing, are unproven.

“Both projects together comprise a grand experiment in intensive land management on a scale never attempted before,” the groups wrote to Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and service Director Aurelia Skipwith.

Bureau officials defended the effort Wednesday, Jan. 13.

“Addressing the threat to the Great Basin’s sagebrush ecosystems from fire

and invasive grasses using a variety of management actions and tools is a crucial part of BLM’s multiple use mission,” agency spokeswoman Alyse Sharpe said in a statement.

The environmental impact statements developed over the past four years will “allow land managers to select the approaches that make the most sense for their specific communities and landscapes,” the statement said.

More than 21,000 square miles of bureau land burned in the area from 2008 to 2018, the agency said. It said assessments of more than 1,200 fuel breaks dating to 2002 found that 78% helped control wildfire and 84% helped change fire behavior.

Paul Ruprecht, Oregon-Nevada director for Western Watersheds Project, said the work likely will spread invasive weeds, including fire-prone cheatgrass.

“Using cows to mow down vegetation to dirt level to reduce fuel won’t work,” Ruprecht said. “Targeted grazing will only increase cheatgrass, and ultimately backfire.”

NORTHWEST NEWS IN BRIEF

Hanford contractor to lay off 30 workers

KENNEWICK, Wash. — Hanford contractor Mission Support Alliance plans to lay off 30 workers as its Department of Energy contract expires.

The layoffs are set for Thursday, Jan. 21, the last full business day before the expiring contract held by Mission Support Alliance transitions to a new 10-year contract awarded to Hanford Mission Integration Solutions, the Tri-City Herald reported.

Many employees at Hanford work 10-hour shifts Mondays through Thursdays. Typically, most employees transition to new contractors at Hanford, with the new contractor bringing in new management.

Mission Support Alliance employed just over 1,900 employees at the end of September, which was the end of fiscal 2020 for DOE. The contractor could not be reached for comment Friday afternoon, Jan. 15. The layoff announcement was posted online by the Washington Employment Security Department.

Mission Support Alliance, which has held the sitewide services contract since May 2009, is owned by Leidos Integrated

Technology and Centerra Group. The new contractor has largely the same ownership — Leidos, Centerra and Parsons Government Group.

Seattle officer fired after investigation into racist remark

SEATTLE — Seattle’s interim police chief has fired an officer for making a racist remark about a Black man last year, following an internal review into the incident.

The review came after three officers reported their colleague’s comments, The Seattle Times reported Sunday, Jan. 17, based on records released by the city’s police watchdog, the Office of Police Accountability.

The unnamed officer, who worked for the department since July 2017, was fired in November.

In late March 2020, the officer and the three others had responded to a trespass call at a North Seattle hospital that led them to remove a Black man.

Days later, the now-fired officer referred to the Black man as “Kunta Kinte,” a central character in author Alex Haley’s 1976 novel “Roots,” about a young African man sold into slavery, according to the investigation.

When an investigator

questioned the accused officer, he said he used the name “because the individual was African” and he could not remember his name.

Sage grouse review done, but scant time for Trump’s changes

BILLINGS, Mont. — The Trump administration has completed a review of plans to ease protections for a struggling bird species in seven states in the U.S. West, but there’s little time to put the relaxed rules for industry into action before President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

The ground-dwelling, chicken-sized greater sage grouse has been at the center of a long-running dispute over how much of the American West’s expansive public lands should be developed.

A federal judge blocked the Trump administration in 2019 from its plans to relax rules on mining, drilling and grazing across millions of acres of land because of potential harm to the sage grouse. After releasing an environmental study in November aimed at justifying the changes, BLM officials said in a notice Jan. 11 they stand behind their plans.

— Associated Press

Oregon FFA receives endowment

SALEM — The Oregon FFA is more financially secure after a donation of \$500,000 from Northwest Farm Credit Services to establish an “Oregon FFA Today and Tomorrow” endowment.

Kirk Maag, president of the Oregon FFA Foundation, said Oregon FFA was deeply grateful for the generous donation — the organization’s largest ever.

“This groundbreaking seed gift gives us the foundation to establish an endowment fund that will provide support for the Oregon FFA Association in perpetuity,” Maag said.

Brent Fetsch, Oregon president of Northwest Farm Credit Services, is secretary of the Oregon FFA Foundation. He said students who participate in FFA are more likely to graduate from high school, and 93% continue their education beyond high school.

— East Oregonian

Brown moves forward with closing 3 prisons in Oregon

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown is closing three Oregon prisons, a decision authorities say would save the state more than \$44 million.

The governor said she

believes the money could be better invested elsewhere, such as early childhood education. The prison closure plan was included in the budget proposal released last month. On Friday, Jan. 15, Brown said she took unilateral action and has directed the Department of Corrections to move forward with closing the three facilities without waiting for legislative adoption of a budget.

Oregon Public Broadcasting reported the closures will be staggered: First will be Mill Creek Correctional Facility in Salem, which is scheduled to be closed by July of this year, next Shutter Creek Correctional Institution in North Bend by January 2022, and last Warner Creek Correctional Facility in Lakeview, by July 2022.

All of the prisons are minimum-security facilities and inmates are within four years of release. The three

prisons combined employ 237 people and house 749 inmates. The state is developing a plan for relocating all the inmates, according to Department of Corrections spokesperson Jen Black.

— Associated Press

Oregon reports first case of U.K. COVID-19 variant

PORTLAND — Oregon health officials have confirmed the state’s first case of the COVID-19 variant that’s been seen in the United Kingdom.

The Oregon Health Authority said on Friday, Jan. 15, that a Multnomah County resident with no known travel history had tested positive for the variant COVID-19 virus strain. Cases of the U.K. variant have also been reported in Utah, Colorado, California, Georgia, Florida and New York.

— Associated Press

U of O to start environmental justice institute after receiving \$4.5 million grant

By **KALE WILLIAMS**

The Oregonian/OregonLive

EUGENE — The University of Oregon is set to create an institute focusing on environmental and racial justice after receiving a grant of more than \$4.5 million, the largest humanities award in the school’s history.

The Pacific Northwest Just Futures Institute for Racial and Climate Justice will foster collaboration between the university’s College of Arts and Sciences and College of Design along with the University of Idaho and Whitman College in Washington.

The grant came from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

“Oregon has a dark history of racial discrimination,” John Arroyo, pro-

fessor of planning, public policy and management and director of the new institute, said in a statement. “This institute will build a bridge between statements and action toward achieving racial and climate justice on the (university) campus and across the Pacific Northwest, and offer a model for the rest of the country on addressing the most pressing issues of our time.”

Climate change has been shown to have a disproportionate impact on communities of color and people who depend on natural resources for their livelihood.

Stephanie LeMenager, an English and environmental studies professor and co-organizer of the institute, said the initiative would focus on those issues.

“There are so many people at the (university) whose work centers on the fight for racial and environmental justice,” LeMenager said in a statement. “This institute will combine the imaginative and scholarly work of the humanities with expertise in policy, design and historic preservation to help communities around the Pacific Northwest.”

The grant will also fund a post-doctoral scholarship program and environmental leadership training for students, officials said.

“This award will support our researchers’ work to address racial and climate justice through a uniquely humanistic lens,” university President Michael Schill said in a statement.

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