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Trail trials: First stage of MERA management project reaches conclusion, draws mixed bag of reactions

By DAVIS CARBAUGH • The Observer

LA GRANDE — The first stage of a highly debated forest management project has reached completion at the Mount Emily Recreation Area.

The Red Apple Forest Management project at MERA was introduced by Union County for improving forest health and reducing wildfire risk as well as conducting logging for profit, with the proceeds going back into the recreation area. The plan was the subject of a back-and-forth debate for months, with numerous citizens and residents of MERA concerned for the safety and condition of MERA's trails, landscape and wildlife. With this year's section of forest management work in the books, the county is set to gather public input on the project at the upcoming MERA Advisory Committee meeting on Tuesday, May 3.

"We're through about 50 acres of 300, so not much of a start, but it's a start," Union County Parks Coordinator Sean Chambers said. "I think it's a lot of work to get done, but I'm excited to keep it going."

ReedCo Forestry, of Union, agreed to take the bid on Jan. 5 and began work on the recreation area in early February — the timber organization finished the first stage of the two-year project in roughly one month. Chambers noted that the contract period states two years of work to be performed by ReedCo but that no guarantees can be made for when the project will be fully completed.

The project aims to limit wildlife danger across the 300-acre Red Apple area in the southeast section of the recreation area. The work includes thinning, mastication and removal of fuels. According to Chambers, the final revenue from the logging portion of the project will not be fully determined until the project concludes.

The bulk of the first phase of the work took place off of the Igo Lane entrance to MERA. Primary thinning and logging was done in the area near the Lower Hotshot, Skills and Bridleway trails. The affected area will have no future work, except for the burning of large slash piles that will take place early next winter.

"Part of the contract is the cleanup, so the burning will be on the contractor. We'll follow up with some vegetation management that's not on the contractor," Chambers said. "That will be something the county coordinates with other contractors or does ourselves."

The timing of the project, which was pushed back slightly to allow for more



Tracks made by heavy logging machinery stand out against the green spring grass in the lower Mount Emily Recreation Area outside La Grande on Friday, April 22, 2022, following the first stage of the Red Apple Forest Management project.

Davis Carbaugh/The Observer



Chopped trees line a section surrounding Lower Hotshot Trail at the Mount Emily Recreation Area on Friday, April 22, 2022, following the completion of the first stage of the Red Apple Forest Management project outside La Grande. Union County Parks Coordinator Sean Chambers said this winter's batch of work saw 50 acres treated out of the 300-acre region of designated forest management.

Davis Carbaugh/The Observer

public feedback, was dependent on frozen conditions in order to reduce the impact on the land and trails.

Several trails saw damage as part of the work, primarily with ruts from machinery on the Bridleway and Lower Hotshot trails. Logs and limbs from the northern section of the work area were

moved to the lower Bridleway area. The soil damage has drawn criticism from a number of residents, a topic that will be discussed at the upcoming MERA Advisory Committee meeting.

"Those things do happen and it will come back," Chambers said. "From all the professionals and feedback I've

MEETING INFORMATION

The MERA Advisory Committee Meeting is set to take place at 6 p.m. on May 3. The public can participate via Zoom or on Webinar at 819 8627 1962 with passcode 504707.

talked to, everyone is pleased with the outcome and what's been achieved."

Local concerns

Not everyone is pleased, however. Bart Barlow, a member of the advisory committee and resident of MERA, reached out to the county to assist in organizing local hikers, mountain bikers and other members of the community to repair damage to trails and mitigate watershed soil and erosion impacts.

"If the county really cared about MERA and the community, they would schedule a walkover right now with the public to explain what was done and to learn what was good and what was bad about it so that we don't make this mistake again," he said.

Barlow, who worked with Boise Cascade when the company owned and logged the area, stated his disagreement with the logging methods used in the Igo Lane area. He said disturbed soils, displaced ground, compaction and runoff could have been avoided.

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Forest's fiery plans might fizzle out

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Trevor Lewis was almost ready to start spreading flames when the rain arrived.

The rain stopped, but it was supplanted by snow.

Regardless of whether the precipitation has been liquid or frozen, there's simply been too much moisture during April for Lewis and other U.S. Forest Service officials to begin their ambitious plans for pre-

scribed burning on parts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

"Right now it's just too wet," Lewis said on Tuesday, April 26.

He's an assistant fire management officer for the Wallowa-Whitman's Burnt Powder Fire Zone, in the fuels division.

Given ideal conditions, forest managers had hoped to light controlled fires on several thousand acres around the south end of the forest, including in

the Sumpter and Whitney valley areas and in the southern Wallows around Balm Creek Reservoir, Lily White and Sparta Butte.

Conditions have not been ideal. Far closer to the opposite, in fact.

But it didn't start that way.

'Back in prescription'

Lewis said that in early April, with the snow line receding and generally dry

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Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald, File

A La Grande Hot Shot firefighter uses a drip torch to ignite dry grass during a prescribed fire near Phillips Reservoir on April 15, 2021. Conditions have been too wet so far this spring for prescribed burning.



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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section

	Tonight		Sunday
	41 LOW		57/40
	Cloudy, a shower		Partly sunny

CONTACT US

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