

Public now has until Aug. 28 to file objections

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on a wide range of environmental, social and economic factors.

The public now has until Aug. 28 to file objections, kicking off another 90-day resolution period. Only groups and individuals who have previously established legal standing can file objections. Once that is complete, the Northwest regional forester in Portland will sign off on a record of decision.

Jim Pena, the previous regional forester in Portland, retired July 3. The Forest Service has not yet named his replacement.

In general, forest supervisors for the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur said the plans strive for more active management to improve forest health and reduce the risk of the large and dangerous wildfires plaguing the West.

Part of that is doubling the annual timber harvest across all three forests from a recent average of 101 million board-feet to 205 million board-feet. Between forest products, livestock and recreation, the Forest Service estimates the revised Blue Mountains Forest Plan will create up to 1,173 new jobs and \$59.5 million in added income in the region.

Warness said that all sounds good, but she — and others — question how the Forest Service will achieve such ambitious numbers.

“The plan itself is fairly vague in their desired future conditions as to what they’re trying to achieve on the landscape,” Warness said. “I think that is causing a lot of frustration for a lot of people who have been highly involved.”

Long overdue

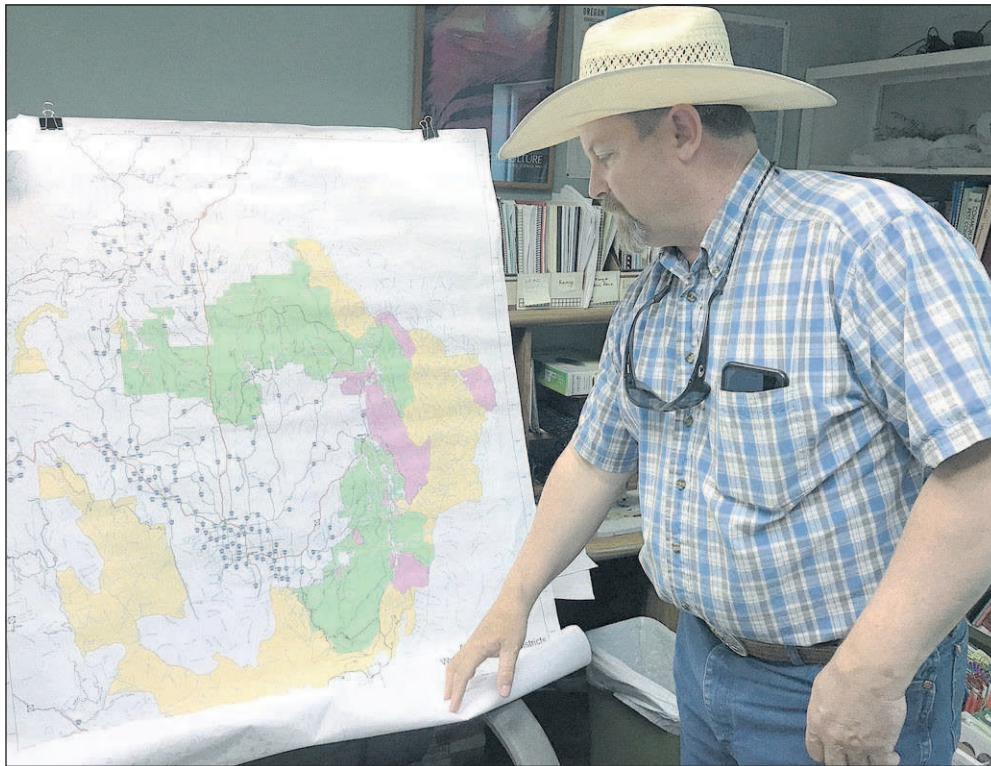
Forest plans are generally updated every 10 to 15 years, though the current Blue Mountains Forest Plan was adopted in 1990. The revision process, which started in 2003, has lasted as long as the plan it will produce.

A draft of the plan was released in 2014, though it was universally panned by the Eastern Oregon counties and environmental and industry groups. The Forest Service received more than 4,300 comments, nearly all of them negative.

In 2015, the agency decided to re-engage the public, holding a series of meetings to hear concerns and ideas. Officials developed two new plan alternatives, including the latest preferred alternative, dubbed “E-Modified.”

Steve Beverlin, the Malheur National Forest supervisor based in John Day, said E-Modified should lead to an overall increase in the pace and scale of restoration across the forests, working with local partners and collaborative groups.

“I think those opportunities are really interwoven across all



George Plaven/Capital Press

Todd Nash, a rancher and Wallowa County commissioner, looks at a map showing grazing allotments within the Wallowa Valley Ranger District of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The areas in green show active allotments, while the areas in pink are vacant allotments and the areas in yellow are closed allotments.



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Freshly cut timber is stacked in the yard at Boise Cascade's Elgin, Ore., plywood mill.

three forests,” Beverlin said.

The Forest Plan itself does not make any decisions on specific projects, but it does establish the sideboards for future work, setting goals and desired conditions on the landscape. The overarching goals are ecological integrity and economic and social well-being, leading into guidelines on timber, grazing, access, wilderness, recreation and other uses.

To fully implement Alternative E-Modified, the Forest Service estimates it would need an annual budget of \$78.5 million, which is \$6 million more than recent allocations. Beverlin said he does not expect funding to increase, but he pointed to several other agency-wide initiatives that will help do work quickly and more efficiently.

For starters, Beverlin said the Forest Service is looking to tweak how it reviews projects under the National Environmental Policy Act, putting crews to work faster while avoiding costly lawsuits.

Congress also recently passed legislation ending the practice of “fire borrowing,” in which the Forest Service took money from its fire prevention programs to pay for fighting wildfires. Wildfires will now be covered under a \$2 billion federal disaster fund.

“The fire funding fix is coming on board next year, so

that is going to provide some additional funding across the Forest Service to address some of these critical issues,” Beverlin said. “So we’re excited about that.”

Timber harvest

One oft-cited issue is the sheer amount of timber and undergrowth building up in the forests, feeding ever-larger wildfires such as the 110,000-acre Canyon Creek Complex near John Day in 2015.

Warness, with Boise Cascade, said the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur forests grow about 800 million board-feet of timber every year, of which approximately 400 million board-feet — enough for 30,000 houses — is left to deteriorate.

As a result, Warness said the situation has compounded over the last 20 years and left the woods severely overstocked and prone to massive wildfires, as well as insect and disease outbreaks.

“We believe that logging is an important tool that can be used on this landscape,” Warness said.

Doubling timber harvest would provide some certainty for the industry, Warness said, but the plan does not offer any guarantees the Forest Service will be able to meet those targets each year.

Lawson Fite, an attorney

with the American Forest Resource Council in Portland, agreed the plan does not provide a clear enough direction for timber harvests that would maintain the mill infrastructure in Eastern Oregon.

“It’s not a directional document, like a forest plan should be,” Fite said. “There’s no getting from A to B in there.”

Fite said the organization is still reviewing all 5,000 pages of documents, but is “seriously considering” filing an objection.

“So many mills have closed, and the level of timber that’s being processed in Eastern Oregon is just a fraction of what it used to be,” Fite said. “What we have now is a level of infrastructure that is really a minimum for what the Forest Service will need to manage the landscape for forest health and fire resilience.”

Livestock grazing

The national forests are likewise critical for Eastern Oregon ranchers, who are a vital cog in the region’s economy.

John Williams, a recently retired livestock agent for Oregon State University Extension in Wallowa County, said local agriculture is a \$60 million a year business, and the vast majority comes from raising cattle.

“It’s the economic base for our county,” Williams said. “We want to produce as much as we can.”

Alternative E-Modified does call for potentially adding 51,600 animal unit months, or AUMs, associated with vacant allotments for livestock across the three forests. An AUM describes the amount of forage one cow and her calf, one horse or five sheep or goats would eat during a month.

Todd Nash, a longtime rancher and a Wallowa County commissioner, remains skeptical whether that will come to fruition. He said the plan lends itself to more stagnation,

Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision changes under review

The U.S. Forest Service released its final environmental impact statement for the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision in June, selecting Alternative E-Modified as its preferred alternative.

Item	Current (no change)	Alternative E-Modified	Percent change
Miles of road maintained annually	2,023	2,212	9.3%
Animal unit months, grazing	242,800	294,400	21.3
Timber volume (million board feet)	79	205	159.5
Annual forest restoration* (acres)	52,702	69,200	31.3
Jobs created†	1,647	2,820	71.2
Income† (millions of dollars)	\$54	\$113.5	110.2

*Tree thinning, treatment †Timber, livestock and recreation

Source: U.S. Forest Service

Capital Press graphic

and appears to favor vacant grazing allotments as “grass banks,” rather than issuing new grazing permits.

At the same time, grazing restrictions continue to get tighter for riparian protections and threatened plant species, Nash said. He specifically mentioned a lawsuit filed in January to block grazing around Spalding’s catchfly, a summer-blooming member of the carnation family, on 44,000 acres within the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area.

“Cattle are always pointed at as the villain,” Nash said. “We think that they have a role here in Wallowa County, one of which is reducing fine fuels availability. ... All the fire managers will tell you that fine fuels, a.k.a. grasses, are what carry the flames.”

Matt McElligott, owner of LM Ranch in North Powder and public lands chairman of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association, said ranchers made significant progress on easing some restrictions in the plan last year. Watershed health is now linked to trends in individual allotments, he said, which in turn dictate grazing standards such as stubble height and stream bank alterations.

“What they had placed in there earlier, it wasn’t going to work,” McElligott said. “It was just too restrictive for grazing.”

McElligott said he does still worry that biological opinions for endangered fish issued by federal agencies will supersede the Forest Plan. One such opinion on the Malheur National Forest, he said, is “more anti-grazing than anything else I’ve read.”

“I’d like for the Blue Mountains plan to be the plan that everybody runs under,” McElligott said.

Access, wilderness

On the other hand, some environmental groups say the plan places too much emphasis on resource extraction, and does not do enough to protect old-growth trees and wildlife.

Doug Heiken, conservation and restoration coordinator for the Portland-based Oregon Wild, said untouched wilderness areas have become increasingly fragmented over the years, and the Forest Plan now overemphasizes logging and grazing at

the expense of habitat.

“We’re really afraid the Forest Service is going to lose sight of the entire reason we had protections for these large trees,” Heiken said. “That’s especially important in light of climate change. Those trees are big reservoirs for carbon.”

Species such as wolves, goshawks, pileated woodpeckers and Endangered Species Act-listed fish would all do better in greater unmanaged wilderness, he said. He agreed there is a need for more active forest management, but argued that should take the form of thinning, using fire as a management tool when the weather is favorable, and perhaps most controversially, closing roads.

“Nobody needs all of those roads,” Heiken said. “We do need reasonable access to our forests, obviously. ... We can have reasonable access to lands and still conserve our water quality, conserve our salmon and save our big game from disturbances.”

Road closures remain a major source of contention in the plan. The three forests have a combined 23,421 miles of roads, while the projected annual maintenance of roads is just 2,007 miles, creating a backlog of maintenance needs.

The Forest Service has repeatedly said the plan does not close any roads, and those decisions will be made at a project-specific level. However, Bruce Dunn, a forester for RY Timber in Joseph and a Wallowa County commissioner-elect, said the plan does set the stage for roads to be closed, cutting off a vital link to residents’ way of life — from wildlife viewing to accessing firewood and picking mushrooms and berries.

“You add all that together, and that’s why we have this opposition to it,” he said. “I think this is going to be a big thing when we get back into travel management.”

The Forest Service said it received its first two objections to the plan last week. Beverlin said the agency looks forward to working with the public to bring the plan across the finish line and start accelerating restoration in the forests.

“We’re optimistic we’re going to be able to do that across the Blues,” Beverlin said.

Conaway doesn't foresee much change to crop insurance in farm bill

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Speeding up the process is needed, he said.

“To move forward is something we want to see,” Harris said. “If we stall out these agreements, it just exacerbates the problems, especially when we look at our trade into Mexico with the current structure of new tariffs that have been placed on frozen french fries because of the breakdown in communication in the original NAFTA renegotiations.”

Retired wheat farmer Randy Sues asked why Trump and the



Rep. Michael Conaway

U.S. don’t use World Trade Organization trade dispute processes to address unfair trade issues against the country more often, particular with China.

Previous administrations have worked as though the U.S. should be an example in trade for the rest of the world, Conaway said.

“China cheats, and this president’s going after them,” he said. “I’m encouraged that we’ve got a

president now who’s willing to fight to try to enforce our trade deals. We all (learned) in school to stand up to a bully, and sometimes the bully punches back. That’s what’s happening.”

Conaway understands that ag representatives can find China’s retaliation “unsettling,” but said it’s the right move for Trump to make.

“It’s the right fight to have,” Conaway said. “I think President Trump’s much more amenable to going after folks like this. There’s a lot in play right now, and we also don’t know what’s going on behind the

scenes. (Wife Suzanne) and I raised four children: Spank one, and the other three got real perfect for a while.”

Trump also told ag committee leaders that he wanted “bigger, better” and “great” crop insurance, Conaway said.

Conaway doesn’t foresee much change to crop insurance in the farm bill.

Conaway told the ag leaders he was “beyond compelled” to finishing the Farm Bill on time, by the Sept. 30 deadline, to provide farmers with certainty.

“I’m moving heaven and earth,”

he said. “I know how hard things right now are in their world. They’ve burned through equity, they’ve burned through capacity to stay in the fight (through) these long, extended periods of low commodity prices. We’re trying to get a farm bill done as quickly as possible so that at least we can take that unknown off the table for them by the end of September.”

Other topics during the breakfast meeting included commercial long-haul driver hour requirements, labor, the Columbia River Treaty, rural broadband needs and research priorities.

“There’s still plenty of room for this thing to go higher,” he said. “It just depends how high speculators want to take it.”

‘This is what the market has needed to see. It’s a step in the right direction’

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“They were there maybe a month, and when they fell off, it was an epic collapse,” said Dan Steiner, grain merchant for Morrow County Grain Growers in Boardman, Ore. “I don’t expect it to come anywhere close to that.”

Back then, world stocks were about 122 million metric tons. Today, the USDA estimates world stocks at about

260 million metric tons, Steiner said.

“We’re not running out of wheat globally, but we are reducing supplies,” said Darin Newsom, commodity market consultant in Omaha, Neb. “This is what the market has needed to see. It’s a step in the right direction and the markets are certainly reacting to that.”

In the last two weeks, grain speculators purchased more

than 250 million bushels on the futures market in Chicago and 200 million bushels in Kansas City, Steiner said. But the rally isn’t driven by demand, he said. “We’re not selling any more wheat,” Steiner said. “Our sales have been rather pathetic, actually.”

Wheat sales are about 115 million bushels behind last year’s sales, he said.

The USDA projected being

ahead on sales. Steiner said wheat sales need to increase by at least a third just to catch up with USDA projections.

The \$6 per bushel price range for winter wheat is a “pretty tough ceiling,” for the Chicago and Kansas City market, Newsom said. Soft red winter wheat is priced at \$5.65 per bushel to \$5.70 per bushel in Chicago.

“It’s going to be hard to

push it higher, but not impossible given the momentum we’ve got right now,” he said. “We could push up a little past \$6 this time around.”

Newsom said farmers may want to sell any wheat they have on hand if they see nearby futures prices approaching \$6 per bushel.

Krueger recommends farmers hang onto their wheat, or replace some of their sold

wheat with call options on the Chicago market.

Steiner still expects soft white wheat prices to move higher after harvest and into the winter, especially if Australia’s competing wheat crop continues to struggle.

“There’s still plenty of room for this thing to go higher,” he said. “It just depends how high speculators want to take it.”