

BLM final plan to manage SE Oregon expected in early '20

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

on the draft management plan amendment and EIS.

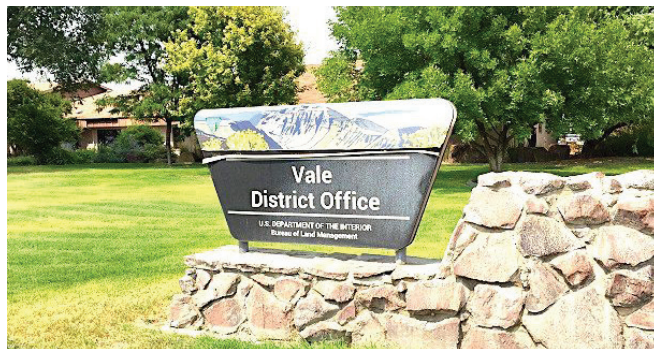
Gonzalez said review-and-protest periods — of 30 days for the public and 60 for the Oregon governor's office — start after the final EIS is released. BLM will ask tribes to participate in a government-to-government consultation if they wish.

The agency would try to resolve any protests before issuing a final record of decision, he said. Parties that formally protest the final EIS have standing to appeal the record of decision.

As for tribes, "that consultation occurs when the tribe wants to start it, but we would like to complete it before we issue the record of decision,"

The final Environmental Impact Statement connected to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's plan for managing 4.6 million acres of southeastern Oregon could be released as soon as February, the agency's Vale District Manager Don Gonzalez said.

The district is amending a 2002 plan that was vacated in federal appeals court and then subject to a 2010 settlement agreement. The settlement required updated information about lands with wilderness characteristics and an analysis of various management scenarios. A public comment period ended Aug. 28



Bureau of Land Management
The Bureau of Land Management's district office in Vale, Ore.

Gonzalez said. Comments on the draft EIS included that BLM's preferred alternative does not match that of the Interior Department-sanctioned, multi-stakeholder Southeast-

ern Oregon Resource Advisory Committee, he said. The committee supported the alternative that protects 33 of the 76 areas deemed to have wilderness characteristics. "We will address that

in the final environmental impact statement," Gonzalez said.

Of the four management-action alternatives proposed, the one BLM prefers aligns best with Interior's priorities and BLM's multiple-use mission, he said.

The BLM-preferred approach would not protect wilderness. It would keep current land-use planning allocations and grazing policies while providing for a sustainable forage yield. It would keep vehicle restrictions to protect grouse habitat.

The Oregon Natural Desert Association expressed many concerns about the process and BLM's preferred

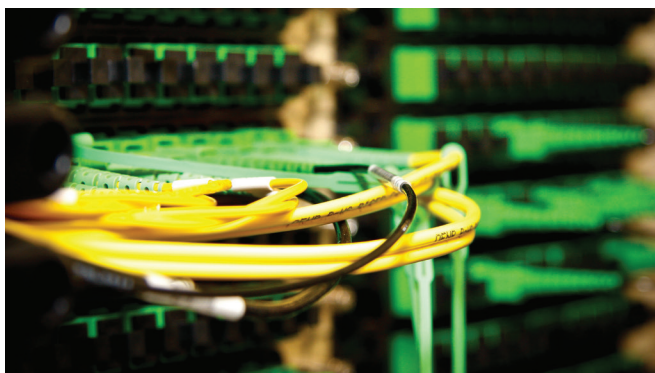
alternative. In an electronic newsletter to members, it wrote that the agency's preferred alternative "does not propose to manage any lands with wilderness characteristics in a way that will protect them," disregards stakeholder input, and "leaves many of the Owyhee's wilderness areas vulnerable to development." ONDA also wrote a 123-page comment letter to Gonzalez.

Some people expressed concern about impacts on sage grouse habitat, invasive species and grazing — from permit availability to environmental and wildfire impact, he said. Others advocated wildlife-connectivity corridors.

FCC authorizes \$4.9 billion for rural broadband

Investments to be made over 10 years

By GEORGE PLAVERN
Capital Press



USDA
The Federal Communications Commission is investing in more and better internet connectivity across the rural U.S.

From self-driving tractors to irrigation pivots controlled by smartphones, modern farming relies on technology to grow more crops with less water, fuel and fertilizer.

Precision agriculture, in turn, requires access to high-speed broadband internet, but according to the Federal Communications Commission approximately 19.4 million mostly rural Amer-

icans still lack connectivity — what is known as the "digital divide."

The FCC has authorized \$4.9 billion over the next 10 years to continue bridging

that digital divide, with funding for smaller rural carriers to maintain, improve and expand affordable broadband in 455,334 homes and businesses across 39 states and American Samoa.

Oregon will receive \$67.6 million to strengthen rural broadband at 4,689 locations; Idaho will receive \$49.9 million for 4,914 locations; and Washington will receive \$13.9 million for 2,037 locations.

FCC Chairman Ajit Pai visited Eastern Oregon in 2018 with U.S. Rep. Greg Walden to discuss internet access in rural Umatilla County. Pai and Walden met with local officials and business leaders in Pendleton, Hermiston and Weston who talked about the challenges of having slow and inconsistent internet in the 21st century economy.

According to the latest FCC Broadband Deployment Report, communities are making progress in closing the digital divide, which Pai described as the commission's top priority. The report shows the number of Americans without broadband access dropped from 26.1 million in 2016 to 19.4 million at the end of 2017.

The minimum benchmark for broadband internet is defined in terms of downloading and uploading speeds. The FCC standard is 25 megabits per second

and downstream — such as downloading files, receiving emails or simply visiting different web pages — and 3 megabits per second upstream, such as uploading files or sending emails.

Earlier this year, rural internet carriers agreed to accept subsidies from the FCC based on a model intended to keep their rates reasonable in areas where the cost of installing broadband is high.

In return, carriers must provide at least 25 Mbps upstream and 3 Mbps downstream to more than 363,000 locations, plus 37,000 locations on tribal lands.

In a statement released Aug. 22, Pai said the move is a win-win for rural Americans and taxpayers.

"Carriers get the predictable support they need to deliver broadband to their customers in these high-cost rural areas. And taxpayers, who fund this support through a fee on their phone bills, are getting more bang for their buck," Pai said.

The first due date for carriers to improve and expand service is 2022.

Walden, Oregon's only Republican congressman, said he is grateful the FCC recognizes the need to expand rural broadband in his largely rural district.

"There are still too many Oregonians who lack access to reliable broadband inter-

net service and thus access to things like telemedicine, remote learning, next generation emergency services and video streaming because of insufficient internet service," Walden said.

Joe Franell, CEO of Hermiston-based Eastern Oregon Telecom, said he supports any effort to close the digital divide but does not believe the latest investment moves the bar far enough, or fast enough.

"This is not necessarily new coverage," Franell said. "This could be upgrades to existing networks. In fact, we may be spending over \$60 million in Oregon and not bring broadband to a single new customer."

Franell also worries that, in 10 years, the FCC minimum broadband speeds of 25 Mbps upstream and 3 Mbps downstream will no longer be adequate for rural Oregonians.

Eastern Oregon Telecom is currently building fiber optic cable to homes across three rural cities, including Adams, Athena and Weston, with a combined population of 2,136. Franell said the speeds will offer 100 Mbps both upload and download speed.

Compared to 25 Mbps upstream and 3 Mbps downstream, "That's like going from a Volkswagen to a Lamborghini," Franell said.

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