

Local

Walden holds town hall with focus on local wildfires

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Forest fire prevention, restoration, and Greater sage-grouse habitat topped the items discussed during a question-and-answer presentation given during a Townhall meeting, September 15, led by local agency personnel and hosted by US Representative Greg Walden (R-OR 2nd Congressional District).

Walden was joined by Tom Montoya, Supervisor for the Forest Service (USFS) Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; Lori Woods, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Field Manager; Misty Bennett, District Conservationist for the US Department of Agricultural Natural Resources Conservation Service; Joe Hessel from Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF); Wes Jennings, USDA Farm Service Agency Malheur County Executive Director; and Chair of the Baker County Board of Commissioners Bill Harvey. The meeting was attended by about 50 local citizens.

During the meeting, a list of important facts about the fires in Baker County were revealed: Hessel, representing ODF, reported that 63,000-acres of private land in the county burned this summer impacting 175 land owners. The Cornet Creek Fire burned through 22,000 acres of privately owned land impacting 93 separate land owners from Ebell Creek west.

The Windy Ridge Fire, which eventually burned together with the Cornet Creek Fire, burned 25,000 acres of private land from Ebell Creek east to Interstate-84 impacting 50 land owners. The Eldorado Fire burned 16,000 acres of private land impacting 10 private land owners. Eagle Complex Fire burned through 500 acres on private land impacting 25 land owners. The Dry Gulch, started Saturday, Sept. 12, was still burning as the Walden Townhall meeting took place with, “a big impact to private land,” said Hessel.

Most of the privately owned land burned held timber, native grasses, and sage brush. ODF personnel provide technical assistance to land owners while walking the lands to assess timber salvage options, erosion potential, and other interests such as loss of cattle grazing resources.

Bennett from NRCS reported a number of federal financial assistance programs put in place to help agricultural producers who’ve lost valuable resources to the fires. She mentioned livestock forage assistance programs, a livestock indemnity program designed to help compensate ranchers for death rates above normal to livestock. Drought assistance is also available to

livestock producers.

Bennett emphasized the timeliness of application for the programs and the importance for agriculture producers to document and keep extensive records on their losses. She said there is a 30-day window for most financial assistance programs and urged those in need to contact the nearest NRCS office to begin the application process.

NRCS is currently taking signup applications for soil erosion control programs through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, said Bennett. The deadline for the erosion control program is Oct. 16. Notices will be placed in the local newspapers, according to Bennett.

Rep. Walden mentioned the funding during a disaster declaration begins with county government and then from state resources and once state resources are depleted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency may offer help.

Agriculture producers in need of financial or technical assistance to assess the damage to private property resources due to fire are encouraged to contact representatives of county government, ODF, NRCS, and/or the USFS.

Walden began the meeting by explaining the status of legislation he’s introduced referred to as the Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act (H.R. 1526). The legislation passed the House of Representatives, for the third time, again this summer by a bi-partisan vote. H.R. 1526 now sits in the Senate where, in past attempts, it has failed to gain approval.

“We’ve ignored federal forests long enough to take stock of the results: staggering unemployment in rural Oregon, county governments on the brink of bankruptcy, catastrophic wildfires summer after summer, massive bug kill, and threatened habitat and watersheds. Simply put, our federal forests are a national treasure in peril. It’s time to act to put people back to work in the woods, present catastrophic wildfires, and improve forest health,” Walden states.

Provisions within H.R. 1526 include methods for quicker removal of fuel loads in the national forests by limiting the requirement of the USFS in approving timber sales, a provision to ward off the onslaught of lawsuits brought against federal agency land managers and USFS timber sales by placing a requirement on those who appeal to post a bond in order to bring appeal-money appellants stand to lose should their appeal fail through the court system, and methods and funding for forest restoration after catastrophic forest fires

The legislation has support from other Oregon

Representatives Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon 4th District) and Kurt Schrader (D-Oregon 5th District).

“It’s time for Congress to act,” Walden said.

Walden joined Baker County Commissioner Harvey on a short field trip Tuesday morning, Sept. 15, to assess some of the damage caused by the Cornet Creek Fire several miles south of Baker City.

“We looked at some of the damage this morning. Greg understands it,” Harvey told the roomful of his constituents. “We’re trying desperately to protect what we’ve got. Our hands are tied constantly and the Forest Service’s hands are tied.”

Harvey spoke of the need to address forest fire timber salvage as quickly as possible. “This is time-limited, we’ve got two years to get this timber out of the woods or it’s worthless,” he said.

Local forester Arvid Andersen concurs with Harvey on the need to expedite timber salvage operations on the burnt national forest lands and also recognized the limited ability by the USFS to do so because of environmental regulations.

Andersen spoke to Walden and the panel of agency representatives about the urgent need to repeal environmental conservation measures referred to as the “Eastside Screens” in order to address forest management problems, problems that include overly dense timber stands that lead to catastrophic fires and then result in soil erosion and added sediment to streams.

Andersen believes the huge wildfires and massive erosion events following forest fires are caused by restrictions limiting the size of tress cut for harvest on national forest land to 21-inches and the 300-foot buffer zones prohibiting tree-cutting near streams.

Both regulations are within the Eastside Screens, originally put into the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Management Plan in the early 1990s, according to Montoya.

“How’s that 21-inch rule working today, how did the 300-foot buffer zone protect streams,” Andersen asked to prove his point. “We’re working with both hands tied behind our back and a ball-and-chain around our ankle. I want to cut that chain.”

Walden agreed with Andersen’s sentiment and analogy and explained that H.R. 1526 contains provisions for repealing the 21-inch limitation on trees cut and also the 300-foot buffer zones which disallow for timber harvest work in riparian areas.

Supervisor Montoya speaks of method of repealing the Eastside Screens.

WWNF Supervisor Montoya then mentioned



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US Representative Greg Walden (R-OR 2nd Congressional Dist.) was joined by a panel of agency representatives to discuss the wildfires in Baker County during a town hall meeting held Sept. 15. From left are USDA-Farm Service Agency County Executive Director Wes Jennings, Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist Misty Bennett, Baker County Commission Chairman Bell Harvey, Rep. Greg Walden, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Supervisor Tom Montoya, Bureau of Land Management Field Manager Lori Wood, and Oregon Department of Forestry representative Joe Hessel.

what may be the quickest and surest method of doing away with the Eastside Screens regulations that many believe killed the local timber industry back in the 1990s.

During a somewhat detailed explanation of how the Eastside Screens were originally conceived and enacted, Montoya said that eventually those regulations became part of the Forest Management Plans themselves. Montoya currently leads the project of revising the Forest Management Plan for the WWNF.

“In order to change it, it must be done by a revision of the Forest Plan,” Montoya said.

Montoya said he is hopeful that the 21-inch rule can be repealed through the revision of the Blue Mountain Forest Management Plan. That plan, which guides all activities on three national forests of northeastern Oregon, is expected to be finalized sometime in 2017, according to the latest USFS time estimate.. Montoya said changing the 21-inch rule within the forest plan revision requires a study under guidelines of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Andersen continued his commentary by asking Walden and USFS staff about preventing the catastrophic forest fires in the future and about insect infestation and disease plaguing the timber stands in the fire affected areas.

“The Whitman District is very generous at sharing the bark beetle with private property,” Andersen began. “I’m seeing a trend: bark beetle, lightning strike, crown fires. What can we do about insect and disease.”

Whitman District Ranger Jeff Tomac spoke about an insect treatment project that was recently implemented on a 10,000-acre unit in south Baker County.

Andersen has spoken recently about the USFS treatment project mentioned by Tomac and believes it is much to small an area to adequately quell the insurgence of the bark beetle infestation taking

place within the Whitman District.

During the discussion, fire demographics emerged that paint a bleak financial picture for federal and state government agencies.

Fire fighting costs for the USFS this summer have tallied \$1.2 billion, which equates to half of the USFS total budget. Montoya explained that, through August, there were 26,000 fire fighters on the ground in the west and an additional 250 orders for additional crews that went unfilled because there wasn’t enough personnel available to respond.

“If we can pass this legislation (H.R. 1526), we also solve the forest fire funding conundrum,” Walden added.

Local resident Gary Guyman had specific questions regarding the strategy for fighting the fires this summer. Guyman asked why fire management meetings were held at 8 a.m. and not at 4 a.m., so that fire fighting resources could be managed and enacted during the times of day and night when temperatures are low and humidity levels higher.

ODF representative Hessel fielded the question explaining that normally the agencies try to run a night shift and a day shift but that most of the work was done this fire season during the day hours because of a shortage of resources.

Ed Hardt, who attends most public meetings dealing with issues of land management, along with several others attending, mentioned that in the past private individuals and companies would lend their equipment and labor to help contain wildfires before burning out of control.

Montoya answered that there were liability concerns when allowing private sector individuals to help fight fires. He said that through a partnership with the BLM that, “we capture 98-percent of the fires we get.”

Near the end of the meeting the issue of Greater sage-grouse habitat within the fire region arose along

with questions about the decision expected this Fall from US Fish and Wildlife on the possible listing of the bird as a nationally recognized endangered species.

“It’ll make what happened with the spotted owl look like child’s play compared to what will happen if the sage-grouse is listed,” Walden warned.

Walden said there were funds allocated from within the Farm Bill to go toward enhancing sage-grouse habitat. He added that he is doing everything within his power to avoid the listing.

BLM Field Manager Lori Wood told the crowd that fire damage was the main cause of sage-grouse habitat problems. She said that additional federal funds have been provided within eastern Oregon for equipment purchases by the agency of several bulldozers, engines, and helicopters to help restore sage-grouse habitat.

Wood said that efforts by the BLM are being undertaken to replant sage-brush and grasses within the fire burn areas.

Several citizens attending disagreed with Wood’s assessment of the damage to sage-grouse habitat and stated the belief that predators, including human hunters, remain the greatest threat to the bird.

“Fire increases sage-grouse habitat,” said local miner Guy Michael in a total disagreement with the statements made by Wood. “Historically, it was grassland in this region, not sage brush. The fires are natural through the grasslands. Fire takes down the sage-brush and regenerates the grasses. It’s obvious, it doesn’t take a scientific graduate who spends eight years in a classroom to see it.”

The USFS, in partnership with NRCS, ODF, BLM, NRCS, and Baker County, continue with the Burn Area Emergency Response on USFS lands to assess threats to human safety, property, and cultural resources, and erosion issues, and potential for timber salvage.

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