

Outdoor Rec / Local

ODFW coordination meeting held Wednesday

BY TODD ARRIOLA
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The Baker County Board of Commissioners were joined by Nick Myatt, District Manager, and Brian Ratliff, District Wildlife Biologist, both of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) on Wednesday, December 30, 2015, at 9 a.m., for a government-to-government coordination meeting, which included, among other topics, ODFW lands in Baker County, threatened and endangered species, and deer and elk management.

Present from the Board were Commission Chair Bill Harvey, Commissioners Mark Bennett and Tim Kerns, and Executive Assistant Heidi Martin.

Attendance also included Baker County Emergency Manager Jason Yencopal, Baker County Natural Resource Advisory Committee (NRAC) Coordinator Eric Wuntz, Tork and Wanda Ballard, John and Ramona Creighton, and Alice Knapp.

Harvey, after introducing the Commissioners and guests, explained to those present that the meeting would be an informal discussion, and, while no public comments would be received at the time, they could be expressed at the next regular Commission meeting, scheduled for Wednesday, January 6, 2016, at 9 a.m.

Myatt spoke about the agency structure of ODFW, explaining that the management of the state is divided into east and west regions on either side of the Cascades, noting that Bruce Eddy, Myatt's boss, is the East

Region Manager, his office located in La Grande. In the east region, of the four watershed districts, Baker County is part of the Grande Ronde District, he said. Myatt mentioned that a large portion of ODFW funding comes from the sales of fishing and hunting licenses.

A significant segment of the meeting was devoted to discussing the topics of grey wolf, cougar, sage grouse, elk and deer management, during which Myatt mentioned ODFW Wolf Program Coordinator Russ Morgan, based in La Grande.

Delisting of the wolf, under the state Endangered Species Act (ESA), happened in November, the result of which is delisting under both the federal and state ESAs, in the eastern side of the state.

However, as Harvey mentioned, there is basically no change in the eastern management of wolves under the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, which provides ESA-like protections.

Myatt said that the Wolf Plan, which ODFW is in the process of revising, is in Phase 2, with more management tools available to ODFW, and, with Phase 3 implemented in January 2017, under certain criteria, controlled hunting could be a possibility. Harvey said that Idaho, which allows controlled hunts, and is also a source of this state's wolf populations, is seeing a wolf population explosion, and he hopes that ODFW will use management tools properly, including utilizing controlled hunts.

Wolf depredation was discussed, and Harvey asked about the level



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of proof for confirmed depredation, and Ratliff responded that there are different levels, and that a quicker response time of ODFW to suspected wolf depredation means a better chance of determining, through a rigorous investigation, the cause. Sometimes, this can take days, said Myatt. Ratliff said it's very difficult to confirm wolf depredation.

Ratliff said that the populations of elk in the county are growing, while the populations of mule deer are showing a decline.

In response to Harvey's question about the possibility of deer depredation due to wolves, Ratliff stated that elk are their primary prey, though elk numbers are increasing, and it's difficult to tell what effect wolves are having on the numbers of elk.

Myatt said that, on Thursday of this week, a

GPS-collaring program was expected to have begun, involving 144 mule deer, in order to track movements, and improve management strategies.

The group discussed cougar management, which included Bennett's and Harvey's comments that there is a large increase in the population of cougars, coupled with the observation that cougars are appearing closer to human residences. Myatt said that since state legislation passed in 1994 to eliminate the use of hounds for cougar hunting, there's been a loss of effective management, since the use of hounds is the best method, and cougars are difficult to hunt, with most being taken by chance.

Myatt provided some details about what lands ODFW manages in the county, including the Anthony Creek elk feed

site and viewpoint, west of North Powder, the Auburn feed site, between Baker City and Phillips Reservoir, the Muddy Creek site and Hunt Mountain site, west of Haines, and several fishing ponds, including Pond 203, just east of the Medical Springs exit, north of Baker City.

The state of the Greater Sage Grouse in the county was discussed, including confusion as to a baseline population number, which would be needed to assess whether the claimed decline, over 70%, is accurate, and what the causes are. Bennett said that the effects of predators, a big factor, weren't properly considered, and Harvey said that with other agencies, sometimes, the tendency is to quickly blame grazing for the Sage Grouse's decline, for example, when it's been shown that agriculture

and the Sage Grouse can co-exist, and be beneficial to each other. Myatt said he hopes to get a meeting scheduled in February, in order to bring together a cooperative of individuals from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), private landowners, and others, in order to address these and other issues.

During a discussion about potential listings, reintroductions, etc., of Threatened and Endangered species under the ESA, Harvey said that there must be assurances the species is native to Baker County.

He said that there are issues with reintroducing species to an area in which they can't survive.

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