

BLM Grants Pass Resource Area staff dedicated to management of O&C land

By SCOTT JORGENSEN
IVN Staff Writer

From the front window of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service joint office in Grants Pass, forester Tom Dierkes can see some of the land he's charged with maintaining. But he wouldn't have it any other way.

On Friday, May 25, Dierkes began his day at the Spalding Street office, with Abbie Jossie, who serves as BLM field manager for the Grants Pass Resource Area. The two plan to tour some of the federal O&C land located in Josephine County to view the progress of projects the agency has worked on during the years.

The continued controversy regarding federal timber payments to rural counties has prompted much recent discussion on O&C land. But less is known about what actually occurs in these areas, and what BLM is doing to maintain its mission as stewards of those lands.

Federal O&C land covers most of Josephine County, and is laid out in checkerboard patterns in 20-mile sections. BLM foresters maintain the land, but operate under policies laid out under the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan. And since BLM is included in the federal Dept. of the Interior, it also must follow that agency's administrative rules.

As such, Jossie said, BLM deals with "multiple layers" of management plans. Its first obligation, under law, is protection of endangered species habitat.

All these converging policies mean that BLM foresters often find themselves in a delicate balancing act between producing timber receipts for counties; following the letter of the law with regard to environmental concerns; and the overall long-term health of the forests.

Jossie said that it's all part of the job description for her and other BLM officials.

"Where there are compromises to be made, we make them," Jossie said.

After a briefing in Jossie's office, Dierkes fetches the BLM field vehicle, an olive green Ford Expedition, and drives it to the office entrance. He takes a minute to point out the Savage Green area, located directly in front of the vehicle and visible from the freeway.

Dierkes points out that Savage Green was part of a BLM project in the late 1990s. The area was thinned through a combination of helicopter logging and light under-burning, and its healthy appearance suggests the success of that operation.

However, Dierkes said that the area may require more work during the next five or so years, as part of continuing maintenance.

A love of the outdoors prompted Dierkes to begin his career with BLM in 1982. He's currently two years from retirement, but Dierkes said that his passion for the job has never waned.

Jossie hopped in the back seat, and Dierkes headed down the road to the Birdseye-Jones site. According to Jossie, site names are based on geographic references stemming from nearby creeks and watersheds. Fuel reduction and log-harvesting projects have been proposed for Birdseye-Jones, but are still in the planning stages, according to Dierkes.

Much of the O&C land is bordered by private property, and increasingly so. This urban encroachment means that BLM officials often must work with citizens to address

concerns.

"Most people are pretty favorable about what we're trying to do," Jossie said. "With every project, we make new friends."

There's also the issue of litigation from environmental groups. Dierkes said he has seen many more lawsuits against the agency than when he first began working for BLM.

Such suits tend to drag out projects, sometimes for up to 10 years. Some projects proposed during 2002 still are being litigated, which has halted any work on the land.

"We have projects that were designed, analyzed and sold in the '90s that are just now out of litigation," Jossie said.

The Ford Expedition pulled up to the Bloody-Jones site. Plans call for this area to be used as a helicopter pad so logs can be collected, put on trucks and transported, but environmental groups have protested the proposal.

Much of the federal O&C land is facing what Dierkes refers to as "density-related mortality." If too

many trees grow in a limited space, they then must compete with each other for water and other needed nutrients. That overcrowding leads to diseases and infestations by bark beetles and other bugs.

"We're losing trees every year," Jossie said.

Many misconceptions still exist as to the extent of BLM's commercial activities. The Grants Pass Resource Area covers approximately 250,000 acres, 80 percent of which are set aside from timber sales. Much of the land is inaccessible, and riparian areas are also off-limits to logging, further reducing the amount of acreage available for harvesting.

All those combined factors mean that between 7 to

12 percent of the land can actually be logged.

"There are places in the landscape where BLM has never done a timber sale," Jossie said. "A lot of the land doesn't lend itself to that."

BLM's fuel reductions budget is kept separate from timber sales, despite many assumptions to the contrary. Jossie said that funds for recreation projects on BLM land are "harder to come by" than most would think.

It would be easy to assume that BLM is caught in the constant political crossfire between timber industry-backed Republicans and Democrats supported by envi-

ronmental groups. But Jossie said that in her 20 years with BLM, spanning Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, that such a scenario has not been her experience.

"There are extra layers (of environmental protections) that we didn't have 10 years ago," Jossie said. "The rules have not changed dramatically."

But while issues regarding timber harvests and environmental policy continue to be part of the public debate,

Jossie and Dierkes still have a job to do.

Dierkes navigated the Ford Explorer onto Interstate 5, toward Merlin. Jossie describes that town as a "community at risk" for wildfires.

After taking a quick tour of O&C land in Merlin, Jossie and Dierkes made their way back to the Grants Pass office. For Dierkes, the surrounding landscape is just another reminder of the work he has thus far done, as well as that which remains.



Forester Tom Dierkes views some O&C land



Dierkes and Abbie Jossie (Photos by Scott Jorgensen/IVN')



Josephine County Special Report



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ARE YOU A COUNTY OR A CITY RESIDENT?

by Commissioner Dave Toler

It's a common misconception that we hear all the time. "I live in the city", or "I live in the county." But actually whether you live in Grants Pass, Cave Junction, or rural parts of our great county, we all live in Josephine County.

And there's no better example of that truism than our Josephine County criminal justice system. The Josephine County District Attorney serves all citizens of this county, regardless of where you live in the county. The same can be said for our Josephine County adult jail, it holds both city residents and rural residents of our county. Ditto for our Josephine County Juvenile Shelter and our Juvenile Detention Center. As for Sheriff's patrols, every time a deputy is departing from, or arriving to the Courthouse, Grants Pass residents benefit from their presence.

The truth is, whether you reside in the cities within our county, or in the rural areas of our county, you benefit from the services of your Josephine County criminal justice system.

WHEN THE LEVY FAILS

With the loss of the May levy to fund Josephine County's criminal justice system, the Board of County Commissioners immediately moved to implement the budget passed by the Budget Committee: a budget that reflected a 60% decline in revenue to pay for County services.

The Board took the very difficult step of cutting 125 positions in the County. Lay offs affected every program in the county including Community Justice, Finance, Communications, Commissioners' Office, Technology, Legal Counsel, Library, Public Health, Public Works, Sheriff's office, and Tax/Treasury.

Despite some common misperceptions, the criminal justice system was not the only part of County services being cut. In fact, about 45% of the positions being cut were in programs outside the criminal justice system.

ONE MORE YEAR OF O & C PAYMENTS

At press time, a one-year extension of the O&C safety net funding has passed the Congress and the President has said he will sign the bill. The bill is supposed to provide Josephine County exactly the same amount of revenue that we received this year, with no inflation factor built in.

The message we heard from the voters is that you want us to do everything we can to tighten our belts. With that in mind, we will likely be going forward with all planned cuts in County services outside the criminal justice system. For the criminal justice system services, we will likely provide a similar funding level to the current fiscal year 06/07 with some reduction in positions possible. One thing for sure, we will allow for zero inflation factor in the criminal justice system – something rarely seen in the public sector.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Even though we are receiving the same dollars we received this fiscal year from the feds, we anticipate saving at least 40%-50% of those funds. Add that with the \$3.37 million we tucked away in this year's budget and we will have built up a reserve of at least \$8-9 million for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. That's a reserve that is over 60% of our general fund budget. Again, that kind of fiscal constraint is rarely seen in the public sector. As we use these one time federal funds to build our reserves, this will improve our situation for the 2008-2009 fiscal year.

AND BEYOND 2007-2008

The likelihood of receiving O&C safety net dollars the following year seem pretty slim. The long term solution to funding our criminal justice system, public health, libraries, and other county services will most likely involve a strong partnership between the citizens of Josephine County, the federal government who manages the O&C lands, and hopefully, the State of Oregon. All three partners will need to step up to ensure we have long term stable funding for these vital services that make our community a great place to work, raise our families, and retire in.

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Everything that irritates
us about others can
lead us to an under-
standing of ourselves.
- Carl Jung -