

Fighting fire with trust

Former adversaries build trust, grow consensus in forest management

By Mark Gibson
Columbia Gorge News

Timber burned in the White River fire last summer has been successfully salvaged for lumber due in large part to the work of the Wasco County Forest Collaborative, an advisory work group focused on building relationships and trust among a mixed group of forest users and land owners working with the Barlow Ranger District of Mt. Hood National Forest.

The White River area was ignited Aug. 17, 2020, by a lightning strike and subsequently burned 17,383 acres. The salvage project involved 250 acres of burned timber and involved a number of collaborative agreements.

"We are one of five collaboratives, out of over 30 in Oregon, that have been able to agree on salvage, it's been historically a very controversial topic, and we were able to thread the needle and reach agreement," Andrew Spaeth, facilitator for the collaborative, told the Wasco County Board of Commissioners in May. "I'm really proud of the work we have been able to do there. It's been a really strong and collaborative effort, with over 250 areas of salvage agreed to, representing the least controversial areas. It's an exciting opportunity for the collaborative."

The collaborative has been building its strength, and trust, with several major projects undertaken since it formed in 2015 as an advisory body to the Barlow Ranger District. Members represent a cross section of forest users — loggers, tribes, ranchers, environmentalists and recreational users are represented. It makes decisions based on consensus vote of appointed steering committee members, in partnership with Wasco County. Currently, Commissioner Steve Kramer works directly with the commission.

"Where we are finding strong agreement is in science based management and restoration that integrates social values and has the support of a the public. We have had no litigation on projects so far," Spaeth said.

The goal in creating the collaborative was to work together to address problems created by 100 years of fire suppression in the forest, and address the challenges of a changing climate "by working together, building relationships and trust between former adversaries," Spaeth explained.

The success of the White River salvage project was built on the framework of trust and common goals worked out and tested with three successful projects in the district designed to create a healthier forest and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, Spaeth said. The Rocky Restoration Project and the South Pen and Pollywog Insect and Disease Projects, accomplished the treatment of more than 14,000 acres of district land in Wasco County. The projects emphasized science-based and socially supported projects.

"Wasco County has a lot of dense forest conditions, where fire suppression, past management practices and climate change are all really going to wreak havoc, where a wind-driven fire would result in pretty high mortality," Spaeth said.

Forest treatment

Projects begin with mechanical "mastication" of brush, which literally chews down the undergrowth. "It clears out the forest a bit, and increases habitat and forage for wildlife," Spaeth explained. "It comes back quickly, and there is a lot of wildlife use."

In sensitive areas, like irrigation ditches, crews clear some of the brush by hand. "It has a lighter touch," Spaeth explained.

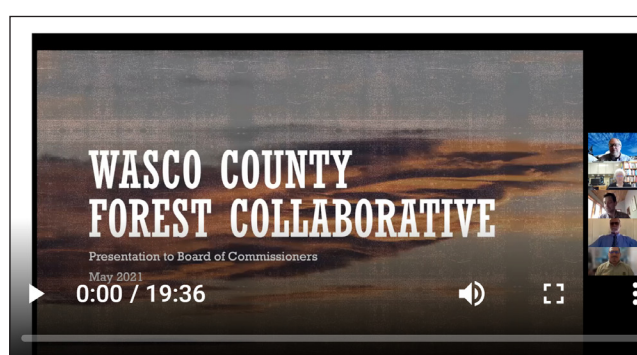
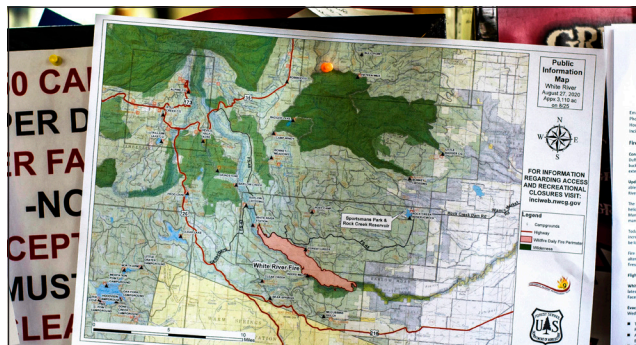
After that, crews hand thin the trees. Trees are dropped on site, then machines are used to remove them.

Although there is some discussion of using slash and trees as "biochar," which



Heavy smoke from the White River fire obscures the hills behind this fire danger sign in front of the Barlow Ranger District office in Dufur in August 2020. Below, a swath of red on a public information map posted at Tygh Valley Market marks the growing boundaries of the fire.

Mark B. Gibson photo/file



A video of the Wasco County Forest Collaborative presentation to the Board of Commissioners is on the counties website, search meetings and agendas.

could utilize slash from thinning to create a fertilizer, current practices focus on firewood opportunities. "A lot of areas within the projects, there is opportunity for firewood," Spaeth noted. He said one project, where the thinning left a lot of downed trees, those trees were left for firewood. "That was picked clean this last year," he said. "These projects will create more opportunity for firewood and fuel wood, all these projects will provide that. So will the White River fire project, we can't use all the trees (for lumber). Some will come down as a firewood opportunity as well."

Firewood cutting in the National Forest is regulated through a fee/permit system.

With fewer trees, and the reduction in debris and undergrowth, "this is really setting the site up to be more resilient to drought, disease and wildfire," Spaeth said. "A fire now will have a beneficial impact, and will make fire suppression easier when needed."

Better management

Because the work above is expensive, controlled burns are seen as the best way to manage the project areas going forward. "We are trying to address forest health, understand the opportunities and barriers to using fire as a tool. Over time we want to monitor effectiveness, where will we be three or five years out in terms of meeting the goals of the projects."

The collaborative, which advises the Barlow Ranger District, has the full support of District Ranger Kameron Sam. "I take shared stewardship really to heart. I want to find the best approaches to forest health, managing water and fire and providing recreation for everyone. Shared stewardship is really a big part of that."

A lot of the ideas underway to better manage National Forest lands have come from the collaborative, he said. "Multiple agency coordination, good neighbor authority, letting others do work on the national forest, paying the state for hand thinning, prescribed fire, that's all new, and is working very well."

The forest, he explained, knows no boundaries between federal, state, county or private management. "The collaborative is a big part of helping us bridge the gaps between agencies and landowners," Sam said.

The South Pen project, west of Dufur, was one of

"We have had no litigation on projects so far."

Andrew Spaeth, facilitator
Wasco County Forest Collaborative

the first done in that wild/urban interface area under a shared stewardship model, and following its success the district was "able to show we are a good investment, and are improving the forest health," he said. As a result, the district has received Joint Chiefs Award funds for these and future projects. "The great work we already have done, and the stewardship collaborations we have already set up, are making us a good investment for the funds we receive. We don't have enough resources, but we are moving closer to that."

"The things we have done so far has been really, really great. I look forward to building on it. The work we are doing here is really positive, and we will get the resources we need over time to do the work on the ground."

Moving forward

Wasco County Commissioner Kathy Schwartz said she was impressed by the work of the collaborative. "Building relationships between traditionally adversarial groups, that is just great. And with no litigation, that is completely amazing."

Steering Committee Members

Tribal — Bob Sjolund, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs
Community Wildfire Protection — Kristin Dodd, Oregon Department of Forestry
State Agency — Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
Private Landowner — Larry Magill, Wamic Rural Fire District
Water Resources — Pat Davis, White River Watershed Council
Recreation and Tourism — Kathy Long, NOMAC
Local Government — Ryan Bessette, Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District
Environmental — Brenna Bell, Bark Forest Products
— Jeremy Grose, SDS Lumber Co.
At-Large — Rich Thurman, Retired Wildlife Biologist
At-Large — John Nelson, School District 21 Board Member

Commissioner Scott Hege agreed, and said, "I'm really happy we are going to be able to see harvest some of the burned timber from the White River fire, that is really exciting to see."

Sam noted investment in the forest will need to continue over the long term. "We will need prescribed fire every five years in some areas, just to keep that brush down," he explained. "If the brush is too high, a wildfire will get too hot and firefighters can't go in. It gets too hot to fight." The goal in regards to fire, he said, is to have buffers and defensible space throughout the forest.

Social acceptance plays a big role, Sam added, and the collaborative is playing an important role in that. "The collaborative group is where we can talk it out, talk about the issues. We can understand where we have buy in and where we don't. That has an impact on what we can do, and we can plan projects according to that."

COUGAR Suit claims use of hounds 'illegal'

Continued from page 1

response and has the authority of the sheriff to invoke the appropriate action, under (Revised Code of Washington) 77.15.245 (2) by using hound dogs in tracking down and euthanizing the dangerous animal," Songer wrote in the post.

The post noted, "The Klickitat County Sheriff's Office will work closely with Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) in carrying out this program. However, the Sheriff Office will be in charge of the program."

The civil complaint, filed May 17 in Benton County Superior Court and obtained by *Columbia Gorge News*, alleges Songer and the county violated state law by "illegally killing cougars with the use of hounds."

The complaint also alleges Songer has not reported to WDFW all of the cougars he and the seven hound hunters deployed under the 140-member volunteer sheriff's posse have killed since the creation of the program, and that some of the cougars dispatched under the program "did not injure or kill any livestock or demonstrate any threat to human safety."

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit, county residents Abigail Spring and David Berger, retained the services of Bellingham-based animal law attorney Adam P. Karp, who asserted that the clause cited by Songer does not grant the sheriff, his deputies or members of the civilian

posse the authority to both hunt cougars with hounds and implement the DWPP.

"The flaw in the Sheriff's position is that he embraces a prohibitory piece of legislation passed by initiative in 1996 as if it were a positive grant of authority," Karp wrote in an email, citing voter-approved Initiative 655, which outlawed the hunting of cougars with dogs in the state of Washington with limited exceptions for "employees or agents of county, state, or federal agencies while acting in their official capacities" in situations to "(protect) livestock, domestic animals, private property, or the public safety."

"As the State has not expressly given the Sheriff authority to hunt with hounds, he lacks any legal justification for his own such conduct, and cannot delegate such non-authority to anyone else," Karp said.

The lawsuit seeks a declaration by the court that the agency's use of hounds to hunt cougars is unconstitutional, as well as a judgment stripping the civilian posse of any credentials to hunt cougars with the use of hounds or other means.

It also seeks a judgment by the court barring the sheriff's office from killing cougars damaging property without authorization from WDFW.

The plaintiffs, according to the complaint, argue the program has resulted in the euthanizing of at least 16 cougars between August 2019 and July 2020.

Songer declined to comment, citing the ongoing nature of the litigation.

The case is still pending under Benton County Superior Court, County Clerk Josie Delvin said.

NOW OPEN FOR DINING
Homemade specialties by Chef Joe Kosarek
Enjoy this one-of-a-kind artisan experience in The Dalles.
Open Wed-Sun. 4-9 pm
541-296-5666
www.baldwinsaloon.com

BIRKENSTOCK
FOLLOW US @footwisefootwear
FOOTWISE
COMFORT SHOES FOR MEN AND WOMEN
Open for In-Store Shopping - Space Permitting
Mon-Sat 10-6pm Sun 11-5pm
413 Oak St • Hood River • 541 308-0770

TRASH TALK

Q. Can I recycle my plastic shopping bags in the blue bin? Dan, Parkdale

A. Dan, Great question. Please don't put plastic bags in your recycling. Bags cause major problems with machinery at the recycling facility in Portland. Good news though- Return plastic bags and film packaging (if clean and dry) to your supermarket. That includes bags that cover produce, bread, paper towels, drycleaning, and case wraps.

questions to:
Tri-County
Hazardous Waste & Recycling Program
(541)-506-2636 www.tricountyrecycle.com