

# NEWS

BY COLIN HOUCK

## BLM PLANS TO LOG THURSTON HILLS

*Disciples of Dirt and other recreation groups oppose the timber sale*

**T**he Bureau of Land Management, in a decision proving increasingly controversial among area stakeholders, has announced plans to extensively log 155 acres of mature forest in Thurston Hills.

The logging is immediately adjacent to the new Thurston Hills Natural area and part of the questionably named “Pedal Power” timber sale.

Prior to the May 30 decision, BLM and Willamalane Park and Recreation District officials, as well as local mountain bike club Disciples of Dirt (DoD) and others, had all been working toward developing the area for recreation opportunities meant to supplement the new trail system in the Thurston Hills Natural Area.

While those involved in the project say it was always understood that a dedicated recreation area was only one among several options being considered, many see the BLM decision to essentially clearcut as a unilateral one, especially considering the wide support for an unlogged recreation area.

DoD’s Peter O’Toole was one of several who provided input during the required comment period after publication of BLM’s environmental analysis. His statement read in part:

“I am concerned that the [analysis] has not fully addressed the impacts to recreational trail users from the timber harvest proposal ... trail design, construction techniques and green tree aggregates do not make up for the loss of the intrinsic value of recreating in a mature forest setting.”

The BLM’s response, in a nutshell, is that because there currently aren’t any recreation opportunities — specifically, biking and hiking trails — at the proposed sites, their analysis doesn’t need to prioritize recreation over other alternatives.

When asked about how he interpreted that response, O’Toole says, “We don’t exist. That’s what they said: We don’t exist.”

O’Toole also notes, however, that although the DoD is less than thrilled about the proposed logging, the organization does not want an adversarial relationship with the BLM, and that DoD is happy to have trails at all.

The DoD isn’t alone in expressing disappointment, even if in a cautious tone. Willamalane Park and Recreation District Superintendent Michael Wargo declined to be interviewed, instead issuing the following statement:

“Willamalane and the BLM have a longstanding relationship of collaboration in support of each other’s missions. This partnership has never been more apparent than in the ongoing development of the Thurston Hills Natural Area trail system. Recognizing that the BLM has obligations regarding sustainable timber harvest, we are coordinating with their leadership on alternatives that optimally balance those obligations with delivering recreational opportunities desired by the Springfield and surrounding community. We recently had encouraging face to face meetings with key BLM decision makers and will continue to communicate the best interest of our community regarding recreational pursuits.”

If Willamalane and DoD are choosing to exercise an abundance of caution in their responses to the BLM’s proposed action, others are taking a decidedly more aggressive approach.

Conservation group Oregon Wild has been the most vocal opponent of the proposed timber sale. Of the three organizations that filed official comments on the BLM’s environmental analysis, Oregon Wild’s was by far the most substantively critical of the BLM’s decision-making process and its outcome.

Additionally, Oregon Wild filed on June 12 an official protest document with the BLM, which BLM is required by law to respond to before any logging contracts can be finalized.

In their protest, Oregon Wild contends that BLM, in its haste to produce a timber harvest, failed to adequately consider the detrimental effects a logging operation as extensive as the proposed action would have on the scenic value for the recreation area.

In their own words, Oregon Wild charges that, “BLM needs to correct for the internal agency bias towards logging and manage for the recreational and scenic expectations of the general public,” adding, “It is arbitrary and capricious for BLM to ignore the significant scenic and recreational impacts of regeneration/clearcutting.”

Rep. Peter DeFazio and Oregon state Sen. Lee Beyer have also weighed in critically on the proposed action, with both politicians dealing directly with the BLM in hopes of getting the agency to reconsider.

DeFazio, whose district encompasses all of Lane County, expressed dismay at what he sees as a rushed attempt to meet logging quotas without fully considering community impact or other options.

Likewise, Beyer, whose district includes the Thurston Hills area, says he had hoped the BLM would have been more willing to consider the impacts that clearcutting would have, not only on recreation opportunities but also on the environment. Beyer specifically cites concerns about the Clear Creek drainage basin.

As it stands, it’s unclear what effect, if any, these efforts will have regarding whether BLM modifies its decision.

BLM acting field director Michael Kinsey says his office is aware there is now a great deal of interest in the proposed timber sale, but when asked if that interest is likely to have any effect, his answer was a simple “no.”

“We are continuing to talk with our partners, and we are continuing to talk with our public, but at this point the decision that I signed a couple of weeks ago is the decision,” he says.

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