

U.S. Forest Service signs off on Lower Joseph Creek restoration

More than 100,000 acres could be treated

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Accelerated restoration is coming to the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, including an increase in logging and burning.

The U.S. Forest Service has approved a massive proposal to treat more than 100,000 acres on the Wallowa Valley Ranger District north of Enterprise, part of a broader regional effort to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration across Eastern Oregon and Washington.

Tom Montoya, supervisor for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, signed a record of decision for the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project on Friday. Activities will include more than 16,500 acres of commercial logging and fuels reduction, and up to 90,000 acres of prescribed burning over the next decade.

It is the first major project to be completed by the Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Team, a group of local Forest Service employees that formed in 2013 to step up restoration, make landscapes healthier and lower the risk of devastating wildfires.

But the plan isn't without controversy, as stakeholders continue to wrestle with the environmental and economic impacts of such a large effort. The project garnered input from Wallowa County, the Nez Perce Tribe and the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative, consisting of both environmental and timber industry representatives.

Montoya admits the parties did not reach a perfect consensus, but said he is pleased with the result.

"This project, safe to say, is a priority not only for this forest, but for the region," Montoya said.

Initial assessment

The Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project began with a 2014 watershed assessment by the Wallowa County Natural Resources Advisory Committee, which identified 20,000 acres of forestland at very high risk due to heavy fuel loads and overstocking of trees that could be commercially logged.

Another 21,370 acres were recommended for thinning smaller trees, for a combined estimated value of more than \$67 million. The Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Team decided to take up Lower Joseph Creek under the umbrella of accelerated restoration, making forests more resilient to things like fire and disease while also protecting natural resources and supporting the local economy by boosting timber production.

The project area is located on the northern boundary of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, and includes portions of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. Joseph Creek provides critical habitat to Snake River steelhead, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Ten different groups and individuals filed objections with the Forest Service after the agency released its draft decision for Lower Joseph Creek last year. Montoya said they were able to work through some of their disagreements — such as roadless-area conservation and limiting the size of trees that can be harvested — but not everything.

"My goal was to see if we could move a little closer to meeting everyone's thoughts and concerns out there," Montoya said.

Changing conditions

Neil McCusker, who works with the Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Team as a silviculturist, said the natural condition of local forests has over time.

As fire suppression has improved, McCusker said the forest is becoming increas-



U.S. Forest Service.

Swamp Creek, a tributary of Joseph Creek, flows through Wallowa County and will be subject to the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project.

ingly dense — as much as 10 to 20 times in some areas of the Lower Joseph Creek watershed. Higher density means more fuels for fires to become large infernos, and has even changed the composition of tree species, allowing shade-tolerant firs to expand significantly.

The Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project will involve cutting trees across roughly 17,000 acres and using prescribed fire on up to 90,000 acres to bring the forest back in line with historical conditions, McCusker said.

"Really, the focus is on thinning all age classes out on the landscape and retaining old trees wherever they may be," he said.

The final project also calls for improving or replacing six culverts to boost fish passage, and closes 12 miles of roads to address resource concerns while opening 23 miles of roads to provide public access.

Riparian areas

Paul Boehne, fisheries biologist for the restoration team, said they primarily looked at treatments around streams that do not contain any fish populations. These riparian areas are mostly located at higher elevations, he said, and make up 20-25 percent of any given watershed.

But even though the streams do not host fish, Boehne said they serve an important ecological function, providing cold water and filtering sediment where fish do swim.

"That's the value of those large trees standing in the riparian habitat conservation area," he said. "We want to protect those."

Boehne said the Lower Joseph Creek project will not touch old growth trees in riparian zones, and foresters will work to maintain a minimum level of canopy to ensure the water doesn't get too warm, and snow doesn't melt too fast.

More controversially, the project aims to treat 31 acres around Swamp Creek, a tributary of Joseph Creek that does support steelhead. Boehne, however, argues the work is justified, citing lodgepole pine trees that have encroached in the area.

"They shouldn't be there," he said. "It should be a wet meadow that stores water like a sponge."

Instead, Boehne said those trees are sucking up water that would otherwise filter back into the stream for fish. Ultimately, Montoya agreed in his decision.

"I felt, based on specialists, that we needed to do a little bit of work in Swamp Creek," Montoya said.

Stakeholder concern

Several environmental groups have expressed concerns with the plan, though they are continuing to review the details of the final proposal before determining the next steps.

Rob Klavins, Eastern Oregon field coordinator for Oregon Wild, said the organization has spent hundreds of hours over several years to find common ground on the project. The Forest Service, he said, continues to use restoration to treat symptoms in the forest, rather than addressing the underlying management issues.

"Given the politics and special interests behind it, it's been clear for some time that come hell or high water, this project was going to go forward, push boundaries and test the limits of public trust," Klavins said.

Brian Kelly, restoration director for the Hells Canyon Preservation Council, said the organization remains concerned about logging in remote forests.

"Joseph Canyon is a magnificent place," Kelly said. "Hells Canyon Preservation Council has worked incredibly hard through the Wallowa-Whitman Forest Collaborative to find solutions for this project. We are extremely disappointed that those efforts apparently did not succeed."

Environmentalists warn about Trump's cuts to Puget Sound

State tourism bucks are tied to water efforts

By **PHUONG LE**
Associated Press

SEATTLE — State officials, environmental advocates and others are warning of dire environmental and economic consequences if President Donald Trump's cuts to Puget Sound and other environmental programs go through as proposed.

The Environmental Protection Agency's funding for Puget Sound — about \$28 million last year — would be gutted under Trump's budget blueprint released Thursday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 50-year-old Sea Grant program, which focuses on creating a healthy coastal environment and economy, would also be axed, including about a \$4 million hit to the program in Washington state.

U.S. Rep. Derek Kilmer, a Washington state Democrat, called the cuts "completely irresponsible" and vowed to fight the president's proposal.

"It sets a bad starting point for the discussion," Kilmer, who is on the House Appropriations Committee, said in an interview Friday. "These are iconic bodies of water that have an important role, not just environmentally but from an economic

standpoint as well."

Statewide tourism and recreational dollars are tied to Puget Sound and clean water supports shellfish and fishing industries that pumps up the economy, Kilmer said.

EPA money has helped cities, counties, state agencies, local nonprofit and tribes on cleanup efforts in Puget Sound. The money has been used to restore salmon habitat, help open shellfish beds to harvest, manage stormwater runoff, replace culverts that block salmon passage and prevent flooding while restoring wetlands.

Trump's spending plan says it "returns the responsibility for funding local environmental efforts and programs to state and local entities, allowing EPA to focus on its highest national priorities."

The plan also targets the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay. While the plan doesn't identify them, a proposal by the Office of Management and Budget this month called for cutting all or most funding for San Francisco Bay, Puget Sound and the Gulf of Mexico. The EPA in D.C. did not immediately respond to an email.

"We're just at the point where we're seeing things turn a corner," said Sheida Sahandy, executive director of the Puget Sound Partnership, the state agency set up in 2007 to oversee restoration of one of the nation's largest estuaries.

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