

CREEK: Project will involve cutting trees across 17,000 acres

Continued from 1A

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 increasingly 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."

Darren Williams, a staff attorney for the Nez Perce Tribe, said they are still reviewing the final decision and were not ready to comment. Susan Roberts, Wallowa County Commission chairwoman, could not be reached Tuesday for comment.

Lindsay Warness, forest policy analyst for Boise Cascade, said the company was disappointed that the Forest Service removed an amendment that would have allowed the company to cut 21-inch trees under certain circumstances, but overall feels it is a good project.

"We're happy to see it finally come out," Warness said. "It's been under consideration for a very long time."

Boise Cascade will bid on timber sales, the first of which is expected to be prepared by the end of 2018, according to Montoya. In all, the Lower Joseph Creek Restoration Project is expected to make up to 7.5 million board feet available for harvest and support 50 jobs.

Of Boise Cascade's five Eastern Oregon plants, only the plywood facility in Elgin is operating at full capacity. As it stands, Warness said the company imports wood from up to 250 miles away. The Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman forests would need to triple its allowable harvest for Boise Cascade to maintain current mill infrastructure, she added.

"We need a sustainable supply of material from these national forests," she said. "We need to have more of these projects going at the same time across the northern Blue Mountains."

Moving forward, the Blue Mountains Restoration Strategy Team is now working toward an even bigger project that would target 1.2 million acres on the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Ochoco national forests. If approved, the proposal would be 13 times as big as Lower Joseph Creek, spanning 13 counties in Eastern Oregon and Washington.

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Costs of administering pot taxes escalating

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE Capital Bureau

criteria, a spokeswoman said.

SALEM — The costs of administering Oregon's recreational marijuana tax have escalated since initial estimates in 2015, and may be poised to increase again.

In part, that's because it's not yet clear just how much it will cost to build a secure, five-station payment area in the Oregon Department of Revenue.

The project, department officials say, is intended to accommodate the cash tax payments characteristic of the marijuana industry, which due to federal law is largely excluded from mainstream banking services. Many retailers make their monthly payments in cash and in person, and right now they use another area of the revenue building that was renovated for temporary cash handling.

The tax has proven a considerable windfall for the state, bringing in more than \$60 million in revenue in 2016. But it has also created complications for the state's tax-collecting agency.

Administering the tax, the department says, requires special equipment and staff to count money and guard against funny business — all of which costs money.

In early 2016, for example, the department estimated that it would cost \$5,699 to buy air purifiers to mitigate the odor of marijuana that officials say emanates from some cash payments.

The costs to the department of administering the tax is paid for by marijuana tax revenues.

A request for proposals from contractors to renovate the Department of Revenue's building in Salem closes March 22, the second bid for the project. An initial bid was put out earlier this year, but the bids received didn't meet the department's

Because the project was still out for bid Tuesday, it was not known what the final costs will be, according to department officials.

In October 2015, the department estimated the five-station payment area would cost anywhere between \$480,000 and \$1.07 million to build, state records show. In 2016, department officials said they expected the project would land somewhere in the middle of that range, at about \$787,000.

The administrator for the department's administrative division, Shawn Waite, told lawmakers during budget hearings last week that the cost of construction of the payment center was expected to exceed initial estimates in 2015 due to construction inflationary costs, but could not provide an estimate of the increase as the project was still out for bid.

The bulk of the work is expected to be finished in October, and complete in November, according to the request for bid proposals; department officials initially expected it would be complete by June 30, Waite said.

Waite said the department initially struggled with the complexity of the construction project and the building's existing architecture. But Waite also told lawmakers she believed the department hired a private third party to provide counsel on the project, and that the Department of Revenue worked with the Department of Administrative Services' building management officials.

A Department of Revenue spokeswoman said the October date has been the expected completion date for a year and a half, and that it took longer than expected for the department to decide on a location.

Corrections

The East Oregonian works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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