Revised forest plan to be withdrawn

By GEORGE PLAVEN
EO Media Group

After 15 years of preparation, the U.S. Forest Service was on the cusp of updating management plans for three national forests covering 5.5 million acres in the Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon.

Instead, the agency is once again taking a step back as it tries to resolve deep-rooted concerns from residents, industry and environmental groups.

Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa announced the Forest Service is scrapping the proposed Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision, which includes the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests. A final draft of the plans was released in June 2018.

The three forest plans — which all together total more than 5,000 pages — contain guidelines for everything from grazing and timber harvest to wilderness protections. While the plans do not authorize specific projects, they do set goals and desired conditions for the forests, and are ripe for scrutiny.

Forest plans are due to be revised every 10 to 15 years to account for changes in the landscape and to keep up with the latest science.

Casamassa, who joined the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region in August 2018, said he was invited by U.S. Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.) to meet with the Eastern Oregon Counties Association in October, where county commissioners expressed the plans fell short of meeting economic, cultural and social needs.

More than 300 people also spoke out against the plans during objection resolution meetings held across Eastern Oregon in November and December. Objections mostly centered on road closures, forest access and restoring landscapes to improve wildfire resilience, while also providing economic benefit to communities, Casamassa said.

Environmental groups, too, worry about the increasing fragmentation of forest habitat for vulnerable wildlife species, such as wolves, birds and endangered fish.

"These lands are important. They mean a lot to a lot of different people," Casamassa said. "We need to get it right. If it means taking (more) time to do that, that's what we're going to do."

This is not the first time the Forest Service has hit the reset button on the planning process.

A draft version of the plans was unveiled in 2014, and received so much backlash the local forest supervisors decided to reengage with the public over multiple years to develop new plan alternatives.

The end result was a new alternative favored by the Forest Service that officials said would have provided for thinning up to 33 percent of dry upland forests, and doubled the current timber harvest from 101 million board-feet per year to 205 million board-feet.

The proposal also identified 242,800 animal unit months, or AUMs, of livestock grazing. An AUM is the amount of forage one cow and her calf, one horse or five sheep or goats eat during a month. In total, the feds claim the plans would create up to 1,173 new jobs in forest products, ranching and recreation, with $59.5 million in added income.

In the end, the decision to withdraw the revised plans came from Chris French, the reviewing officer and acting deputy Forest Service chief. While the review did not identify any specific violations of law, regulation or policy, French said the plans were difficult to understand and "do not fully account for the unique social and economic needs of local communities in the area."

"Many factors compounded to produce revised plans that would be difficult to implement," French said.

The current Blue Mountains forest plans, which were last updated in 1990, will remain in effect for the time being. Casamassa said the Forest Service will be reaching out again to stakeholders to determine next steps toward the long-overdue revisions.

Despite the setback, Casamassa insisted the last 15 years of work have not been wasted, and the lessons they learned will play a role in helping the agency to come up with Forest Plans that are implementable, and written in plain English.

"To be quite honest, we can't obviously do this on our own," he said. "We need everyone working together."

For his part, Walden thanked the Trump administration for restarting the process and listening to local input.

"While it is unfortunate to have to begin again, I'm hopeful we can move forward in a manner that ensures the needs of our local communities are finally being heard and reflected in the plan," Walden said. "Getting this plan right is important to improving the health of our forests and our communities, reducing the threat of wildfires and maintaining access to our public lands that is part of our way of life in rural Oregon."

Teens test turbines in Boardman

Competitors bring 'gutsy' designs

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Hundreds of wind turbines, each taller than the Statue of Liberty, dot the hills of northeastern Oregon.

So naturally some of the region's young people are interested in wind power. On Thursday, some of them tested hand-designed wind turbines in a wind tunnel at the KidWind Challenge at Riverside High School in Boardman. The two teams whose turbines produced the most milliwatts of power would qualify to compete at the national competition in Houston in May.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Jocelyn Rodriguez and Zac McDonough, of Riverside High School, adjust a turbine blade on Thursday during the KidWind Challenge at Riverside High School in Boardman. Their team, one of five from Riverside, took second in the competition and is eligible to compete at the national competition in Houston.

Gathered in one corner of Riverside's wrestling room, the five members of the Nerd Herd made last-second adjustments on their miniature wind tower, which had wooden blades, wires, plastic gears and a wooden tower and base. The all-freshman team from Heppner consisted of Hannah Finch, Roen Waite, Kylie Boor, Kamron Drury and Edward Ellsworth.

The young engineers eyed the wind tunnel across the room. The 48-by-48-inch enclosure was open on one side with a bank of four fans at the opposite end. The tunnel simulates a windspeed of about 13 mph.

All the preparation would come down to two 60-second sessions in the tunnel and an interview with judges.

The team's turbine design had evolved from one developed by Waite and Finch for last year's middle school competition. This newer model, said Finch, has more power.

"We changed our gear ratio," she said. "It had a ratio of 8-to-1. Now it's 64-to-1."

The Nerd Herd competed against eight teams, two others from Heppner, one from Irrigon and five from Riverside.

When the time came, Waite gingerly set the turbine into the tunnel. He and his five fellow wind engineers stood back and hoped for a good run.

Jon Reschke, regional program manager for KidWind, oversaw the wind tunnel.

"Hit the juice," he directed.

The fans whirred. After 60 seconds, Reschke powered down.

The Nerd Herd turbine had produced almost 30,000 milliwatts in the first run. Not bad, but they hoped for more next time. The team retreated to their table to tweak the blade angles. Half an hour later they tried again. This time, the number dropped to 25,000 milliwatts. Their first run would stand.

The five spent about 10 minutes answering questions from two judges about design, materials, team dynamics and other topics.

Riverside science teacher Rhonda Brennan pinballed from one team to another during the competition, answering questions and sending teams to the judges. The teacher says the KidWind program is a good fit for Morrow County.

"I feel like we're surrounded by wind turbines," Brennan said.

She said the students learn some invaluable skills while designing their wind towers.

"They do a lot of problem solving and analytical thinking that will follow them everywhere into all parts of their lives."

Brennon has shepherded two teams, one high school and one middle school, to national competitions in the past two years.

"It was very mind blowing," she said. "A huge learning experience."

Finally, it was time to announce the winners. The five members of Nerd Herd did fist pumps when they heard their team's name called. Waite held the wind turbine-shaped trophy aloft as everyone gathered around. A team from Riverside (Victor Bucio, Zac McDonough, Adilene Perales, Zenia Pena and Jocelyn Rodriguez) came in second and also qualified for nationals.

Afterward, Reschke looked happy. The variety of designs had impressed him. The students had fashioned turbine blades from plastic, tin, paper and wood in a variety of shapes. They had shown imagination in their designs.

"The word that comes to mind is gutsy," he said. "There were some gutsy designs."

He said the wind tunnel provides a realistic test for the young designers.

"They are dealing with serious windspeed," he said.

EDP Renewables North America, which owns the Rattlesnake Road and Wheat Field Wind Farms outside of Arlington, sponsored the event. During the afternoon, junior high school teams from Riverside competed.

BRIEFLY

Ione house fire displaces six

IONE — A house fire in Ione on Thursday left six people without a home.

Ione Rural Fire Protection District Chief Virgil Morgan said the department was paged at about 4 a.m. Thursday to a home on South Cherry Street, and the home was fully engulfed when they arrived.

The residents of the home had been inside when the fire started, but everyone got out of the house safely. Morgan said they think the cause of the fire might have been electrical issues in the home, but have not confirmed an official cause.

St. John's announces lent services

HERMISTON — Special weekly services during lent are being held at St. John's Episcopal Church.

The public is invited to attend each Wednesday at 5 p.m. at 665 E. Gladys Ave., Hermiston. In addition to the evening service, the gatherings include a soup and bread supper.

For more information, contact Rev. Chuck Barnes at 541-567-6674 or chuckb@eotnet.net.

Parade fee comes back to council

East Oregonian

Following a lengthy revision period, an ordinance establishing parade fees will go in front of the Pendleton City Council Tuesday.

The ordinance was originally put before the council on Jan. 8 and slated for a vote on Jan. 22, but the council decided to discuss it further over multiple workshops.

A new draft of the ordinance scraps the $1,500 fee in favor of a non-specific fee covering "anticipated costs and resource expenditures necessary to facilitate the public safety of the parade" plus a 15 percent administrative fee.

Under the draft ordinance, Police Chief Stuart Roberts will determine the fee's amount and also has the ability to veto a parade proposal if he doesn't have the personnel.

The new ordinance language does retain fee exemptions for four annual community parades — Westward Ho!, Dress-Up, Fourth of July, and Little League.

The council will meet at 7 p.m. at the council chambers in city hall, 500 S.W. Dorion Ave.

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