

Conservation groups seek to halt Trump drilling plan

By KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Four conservation groups have asked a judge to block a Trump administration plan allowing drilling, mining and other activities in seven Western states they say will harm sage grouse.

Western Watersheds Project and other groups asked for the injunction in U.S. District Court in Idaho late last week for Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, California and Oregon.

The groups in March sued Interior Secretary David Bernhardt, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service over changes to land-management plans



This April 10, 2014, file photo, shows a male sage grouse trying to impress a group of hens, at left, near the base of the Rattlesnake Range in southwest Natrona County, Wyo.

involving sage grouse. The March action supplemented a 2016 lawsuit that said a 2015 federal plan put forward by the President Barack Obama inadequately protected sage grouse. The groups say the plan put forward by President Donald

Trump weakens protections further.

“Defendants falsely assert that the 2019 BLM plan amendments build upon the 2015 plans, but in truth they rescind or weaken numerous 2015 plan measures,” the request for the injunction states.

The U.S. Department of Justice, which defends federal agencies in lawsuits, acknowledged on Monday receiving an emailed inquiry from The Associated Press about the injunction request but didn’t respond further.

Millions of sage grouse, a chicken-sized bird that relies on sagebrush, once roamed the West, but development, livestock grazing and wildfires have reduced the bird’s population to fewer than 500,000.

Most of the bird’s habitat — sagebrush steppe — is on land administered by the BLM. The birds are found in 11 states from the Dakotas to California.

The 2015 sage grouse plans are widely considered to have stopped the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from listing sage grouse under the Endangered Species Act. There are concerns that further declines in sage grouse populations could cause the bird to again be considered for federal protections.

“Sage grouse are an American icon that will be irreparably harmed by the wanton destruction of sagebrush habitats that the recent amendments allow,” Erik Molvar of Western Watersheds Project said in a statement.

Community groups look to restore or expand recreational trails

Project looks for 354 miles of improvements to hiking, biking, riding trails

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Umatilla County has no shortage of outdoor space, but it does lack an interconnected network of trails to enjoy it.

That was a common theme at an Oregon Recreational Trails Advisory Council at the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute on the Umatilla Indian Reservation Friday.

At the session, government officials, non-profit leaders, and outdoor enthusiasts all bemoaned the dearth of accessible, well-maintained trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding in their own communities in north-

east Oregon and southeast Washington.

“I was born and raised in Walla Walla but spent about 10 or 15 years in the Portland area where I found it much easier to recreate outdoors,” Walla Walla architect Jon Campbell said. “Which is flipped from what you would ordinarily think.”

But the seven-member council heard from people who are looking to change that trend.

The Blue Mountain Region Trails project is spearheaded by two Walla Walla-based organizations, and most of its proposals are centered around communities in Walla Walla and Columbia counties.

But the Milton-Freewater area and north Umatilla County are also included in the project.

Completed in 16 months ending in February 2018, organizers solicited input from the public as to how

best connect these far-flung communities with non-motorized trails.

Based on the public’s suggestions, planners worked with officials from local, state, and federal governments to craft a document with 354 miles worth of trail ideas.

Andrea Weckmuller-Behringer, the executive director of the Walla Walla Metropolitan Planning Organization, said organizers only targeted public right-of-way for path projects, with projects ranging from improving or rehabbing an existing trail to creating a new trail altogether.

“Some are new,” she said.

“Others are small connections,” Weckmuller-Behringer said. “And the majority is infrastructure building for trails that have fallen into disrepair and that really need to be resurrected. Again, there’s already a lot out

there and it’s just not well maintained.”

The plan includes several trail projects in Umatilla County.

East of Milton-Freewater, the Tiger Ridge Trail reconnection would reunite the West Creek and Tiger Ridge trails by clearing away brush and overgrown vegetation and relocating several areas of the trail to avoid soil and topography issues.

West of Milton-Freewater, the Ridge Route would use 26 miles of existing gravel road for a shared trail that would give hikers and cyclists a view of windmills before dipping north toward Wallula Junction in Washington.

The Stateline project would create a bike route on the Oregon-Washington border north of Milton-Freewater.

The plan establishes the ideas and even provides cost estimates, but actually

obtaining the funding for each proposal requires the public agencies that manage these areas to find grants for them.

Project costs can vary depending on how much work each proposal requires.

For instance, the Tiger Ridge project has an estimated cost of \$100,000 for clearing brush, reconstructing the trail, and performing an environmental review while the Stateline proposal could cost up to \$1.5 million to widen the road and replace a bridge.

While the Blue Mountain Region Trails Plan hews pretty close to the state border, Umatilla County Planner Bob Waldher and Hermiston Parks and Recreation Director Larry Fetter sat in the audience with plans to bring a similar trail system to the west side of Umatilla County.

Waldher said the county and city governments are in

the early planning stages to connect four west-side cities — Hermiston, Umatilla, Stanfield, and Echo — with a trail.

Fetter said walking is one of the most popular outdoor activities and it was about time that the area started offering locals some options.

A group of officials will meet Tuesday to discuss applying for a U.S. National Forest Service grant to help fund the planning stage, but Waldher said the trails could eventually connect with Pendleton and even the Milton-Freewater area through Blue Mountain Region Trails.



Bank of Eastern Oregon opens loan production office in Hermiston

HEPPNER — BEO Bancorp and its subsidiary, Bank of Eastern Oregon, announced the opening of a Hermiston loan production office at 1475 N. First St.

Veteran bankers Lucas Wagner, Jared Lathrop, Jennifer Berry and Melissa Samms will staff the office. Additionally, Bank of Eastern Oregon hired veteran

bankers in Pendleton.

Tracy Hamby and Jennifer Mulvihill join Mike Short and Shayne Wagner in the Sierra Building at 202 S.E. Dorion Ave., Suite 102.

Bank of Eastern Oregon also added staff to its Island City Loan Production Office in Island City. Bank president and CEO Jeff Bailey said the com-

pany is pleased to add the experienced staff.

“These bankers are well respected in the industry and bring many years of banking experience with them to Bank of Eastern Oregon,” Bailey said. “Their knowledge of the local markets and a loyal customer following will serve our bank well.”

Potato farmers scrambling to catch up after long winter delays planting

PORTLAND (AP) — Potato farmers are getting a late start on their crops because of a long winter and record snowfall in eastern Oregon and Washington.

Normally, farmers start planting potatoes at the end of February. But this year the ground was frozen or flooded much later than

usual. Washington State Potato Commission Director Chris Voight tells Oregon Public Broadcasting farmers weren’t able to start planting until April 1.

Farmers are scrambling to cram two-and-a-half months’ worth of planting into one month.

Voight doesn’t think that

will lead to a french fry shortage. French fry companies have month-long emergency supplies in freezers the size of two football fields. But Voight says if french fry companies have to dig too deep into those freezers, there may be some spot shortages around the country.

Stearns Home Loans opens Pendleton office

PENDLETON — Stearns Home Loans announced the opening of its new Pendleton office at 33 S.E. Dorion Ave.

The company reported the new location offers more space to serve its growing team. Greg Galloway, Kurt Hendrix and Chris McClellan have more than 40 years of combined local real estate

and lending experience. The new office also is next door to the Coldwell Banker real estate office and an upcoming State Farm insurance agent office.

“Having these three locations next to each other will provide enhanced local service for Pendleton and the surrounding communities,” according to Stearns.

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The luncheon is being co-hosted by the Pendleton Chamber of Commerce

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