

Forest Plan getting closer

By George Plaven
East Oregonian

The U.S. Forest Service could finalize its revised land management plans for the Blue Mountains National Forests by early 2017, following a year-long re-engagement process with the public.

The plans will essentially guide management decisions on the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests for the next 10-15 years. While the documents do not approve any site-specific projects, they do set goals and desired conditions on approximately 4.9 million acres of public land.

Forest plans are supposed to be updated every 15 years to reflect changes in the landscape and science, though the current Blue Mountains Forest Plan is from 1990. Forest

supervisors unveiled a draft version of the revised plan last year, which was met with criticism.

The negative feedback was so overwhelming that regional forester Jim Peña allowed more time in January to meet with stakeholders and find common ground on issues including road access, wilderness and commercial logging. Since then, the Forest Service has held public workshops across Eastern Oregon to hear new ideas and solutions.

Despite some continued rumblings, the supervisors say the input they've gathered has led them in a positive direction.

"Overall, the engagement process has helped us to better understand our public," said Tom Montoya, supervisor on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. "There's been

folks on all sides of the issue who have provided really good comments to find some balance."

However, Montoya admitted he was frustrated during a recent meeting Nov. 2 in La Grande, where nearly 200 people packed the Blue Mountain Conference Center. Tempers flared, and Montoya said he later heard from people who told him they felt threatened.

Norm Cimon, a retired Forest Service employee of 26 years, said the discussion was not closely moderated and broke down into a free-for-all. "Given the anger that's built up from the rhetoric that's been thrown around, there's going to have to be better management of these meetings," Cimon said.

Cimon, who serves on the board of directors for Oregon Rural Action, a La Grande-based environmental nonprofit, said the tone was set by a letter from state Rep. Greg Barreto, R-Cove, accusing the Forest Service of "bureaucratic ineptness."

Re-engaging with the public is absolutely worthwhile, Cimon said, but he felt Barreto's letter didn't help the situation.

"I hate that kind of talk. I really do," Cimon said.

In his letter, Barreto says "The overreaching heavy hand of government continues to pursue its stranglehold on the rural parts of the state, our way of life and our pursuit of happiness." He also wrote "The preservationists along with

you, the federal government, are teaming up to keep local people from our public lands."

In a separate interview, Barreto said he was unable to attend the meeting in person and was asked by his constituents in the forest access movement to write a letter. Barreto said he intentionally worded the letter the way he did to make a point about people's distrust in the current administration.

Barreto did credit the Forest Service for re-engaging with the public, and said people need to speak passionately to make sure they are heard.

"If everyone goes to these meetings and speaks in blasé language, probably nothing comes out of it," he said. "If there's no passion in what you're saying, then what you're saying falls on deaf ears."

Montoya said the feedback is heard, and will be used to evaluate potential changes to the proposed forest plans. But, he added, people need to make sure they are providing substantive comments backed by evidence.

"It's really not a venting process. It's about addressing issues," Montoya said. "I think we're making positive momentum, definitely."

Montoya said the Nov. 2 meeting was an anomaly, and they could have done a better job facilitating such a large group.

Two more public meetings are scheduled from 6-9 p.m., one on Monday, Dec. 14 in Clarkston, Washington, and one on Tuesday, Dec. 15 in North Powder.

Bull elk poached

East Oregonian

The Oregon State Police Fish and Wildlife Division is seeking information in the poaching of a branch bull elk in the Starkey Unit near La Grande.

The bull was shot and left to waste on approximately Nov. 10 just west of Foothill Road in the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area. The incident happened during the general hunting season for Rocky Mountain elk, which is open to spike bulls only. There

was no season open for branch bulls.

The Oregon Hunters Association is offering a reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction in the case through the state's Turn-In Poachers program. The TIP program number is 1-800-452-7888, and callers can remain anonymous.

Anyone with any information can also call Senior Trooper Kris Davis at the OSP office in La Grande at 541-805-4757.

Brown creates new post to boost grad rate

Office working on job description for new position

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

PORTLAND — Gov. Kate Brown announced Monday she will appoint an education innovation officer whose job will be to boost the state's dismal high school graduation rate.

Brown made the announcement during an education panel discussion at the Oregon Business Leadership Summit here, where she outlined some of her education priorities.

"The position will assist me,

my education team and the Legislature in dedicating resources to increase the number of students who graduate from high school," Brown said from prepared comments.

"There is no question that our education system must be accountable to better student outcomes, including increasing our high school graduation rate," Brown said.

"But accountability also means ensuring that as a state we are empowering the best and most effective practices in our classrooms that support student success," she said.

The administration has yet to complete a job description for the position and to post the job, said Brown spokeswoman Kristen Granger.

She gave no timeline for hiring.

Oregon now has the fourth lowest graduation rate in the nation, up from the country's worst in 2013. Oregon's graduation rate is 72 percent, compared to a national average of 81.4 percent.

John Tapogna of ECONorthwest said Monday the state's graduation rate mars Oregon's reputation in the eyes of employers considering relocating to the state.

"It is really damaging to the state's reputation in a very tangible way," the public policy consultant said.

The graduation rate is perplexing because it doesn't align with the state's test scores, Tapogna said.

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