

Forestry prof says corridor lawsuit has holes

Latest in a series

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

After both Oregon Wild and the Greater Hells Canyon Council (formerly Hells Canyon Preservation Council) filed a lawsuit last May to halt the Lostine Corridor Public Safety Project, Oregon Wild posted a list of "Frequently Asked Questions" on its website to provide grounds for the suit.

The corridor project is a U.S. Forest Service plan to use both hand and mechanical treatments to ostensibly mitigate wildfire in the area west of Lostine, while the two activist groups claim it is a thinly-veiled excuse to commercially log the corridor.

Dr. James Johnston of Oregon State University has an extensive forestry background that includes more than a decade working for environmental groups. His doctorate is in forest science, and he wrote a dissertation about historical disturbance dynamics on the Malheur National Forest along with performing extensive sci-

ence work for the Blue Mountains Forest Partners, the local collaborative group in John Day.

Johnston gained an interest in the corridor project after Jeff Costello and Nils Christoffersen of Wallowa Resources contacted him about the project because of his previous work. Johnston's interests are fire ecology, dendroecology, which is the study of ecological processes recorded in the tree-ring record, and restoration forestry, environmental law and policy, and collaborative governance.

After reading the FAQs, Dr. Johnston concluded a number of its assertions were misleading.

The statement that only 10 percent of the proposed logging addresses safety issues was particularly troublesome.

"Oregon Wild's math does not compute," he said. "One-hundred percent of the project is explicitly designed to address safety issues. Oregon Wild may believe that only 10 percent of the project is appropriate to address safety issues, but that's just their opinion."

He added that the U.S. Forest Service has consider-

able expertise in managing fire and risks to human health and property while stating that Oregon Wild is not drawing on any particular fire management expertise. Johnston also said he was not aware of any expert in fire and fuel management that endorses their claim that only 10 percent of the project addresses safety issues.

"In my opinion, when it comes to public safety, we ought to give agency experts the benefit of the doubt unless

there's clear and convincing reasons to question their conclusions," he said.

The professor also questioned FAQ statements that the project will prioritize commercially logging some of the largest most fire-resistant trees out of the forests over stands of smaller trees that could benefit from thinning, or that scientific evidence indicates that logging in that type of forest will not decrease the severity of fire but would likely increase fire

severity risk in the forest.

According to Johnston, nothing in the administrative record for this project or the Forest Service's communication with the public suggests logging the largest and most fire-resistant trees in the corridor. He said that 100 percent of the proposed logging targets small fire-intolerant forest structure, and a huge body of scientific evidence demonstrates that removing those trees can reduce fire severity and make wildfires more manageable and less of a threat.

"Oregon Wild badly misrepresents the science," Johnston said. "The one paper that they cite clearly states that fuel reduction thinning such as that planned for the Lostine River Corridor is appropriate in cases of unnaturally high fuel loading. This is precisely the case in the Lostine River Corridor."

Dr. Johnston also noted that the Forest Service has documented that the corridor currently contains far more trees than were present before fire was excluded from the area at the end of the 19th century.

"There are very high fuel loadings that pose a signifi-

cant risk to old-growth forest structure," Johnston said. "Much of the old-growth larch in the corridor has died or is dying as result of competition-induced stress. Oregon Wild presents zero evidence that thinning will increase fire severity. All of the available evidence suggests that thinning and prescribed fire will reduce fire severity and protect old growth."

Another statement in the FAQ gave Johnston pause: "Not only will this project not stop a fire, the proposed industrial logging prioritizes many of the most mature fire-resistant stands in the canyon over those that might benefit from thinning."

"The Forest Service is only planning to treat 450 acres within the corridor, which is a tiny percentage of the total land area and a tiny percentage of the total area that probably should be treated to reduce risk of uncharacteristic insect, disease and fire effects," he said. Johnston added that all 450 acres of thinning is targeting the most overgrown stands.

Next: The authors of the FAQ documents will respond to Johnston's statements.

— Dr. James Johnston
Forestry expert, Oregon State University

ROADS

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Wallowa Mountain Loop, is 45 miles of paved winding road on steep side slopes.

It connects the northern leg of the Hells Canyon Byway, Hwy. 82 from La Grande to Joseph, with the southern leg of the byway, Hwy. 86, from Baker City to Halfway and the Hells Canyon and Brownlee dams of the Snake River.

"We still have the hot-plate on, but not as high as we had it," said Roberts.

Some new money allocated to special infrastructure projects will also be available from ODOT in

the coming years. Whether special projects will be identified in Wallowa County has not been determined, according to Tom Strandberg, spokesman for ODOT Region 5. ODOT will be making those decisions over the next four years.

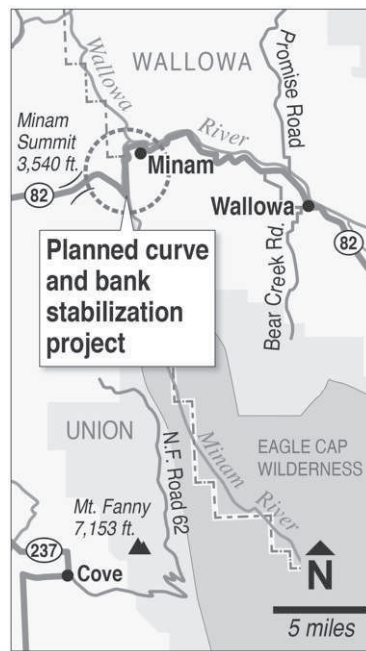
"A lot of the money is going to go to preservation and maintenance," said Strandberg. "If you have a project that is hot on your mind, make sure it's on the county's needs list. The first place we look when we're allocating special project money is the high priority projects on the county plan."

Past special projects

in Wallowa County have included construction of the Automated Weather Observation System and runway restoration at Joseph State Airport and the Community Connection bus barn in Enterprise.

Still on the list and expected to be completed this coming summer are the \$5.5 million Minam curve and bank stabilization project; the \$1.8 million construction of the bike path from Joseph to the north end of Wallowa Lake; and the \$900,000 Wallowa River Bear Creek bridge project.

The Minam and bike path projects are expected to go to bid this month.



Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group

Oregon may join national popular vote compact

By Paris Achen
Capital Bureau

A bill introduced in the Legislature Monday would enlist Oregon in the National Popular Vote Compact contingent on voter approval in November.

By joining the compact, states agree to cast their Electoral College votes only for presidential candidates who win the national popular vote.

A national popular vote would have changed the outcome of the 2016 general

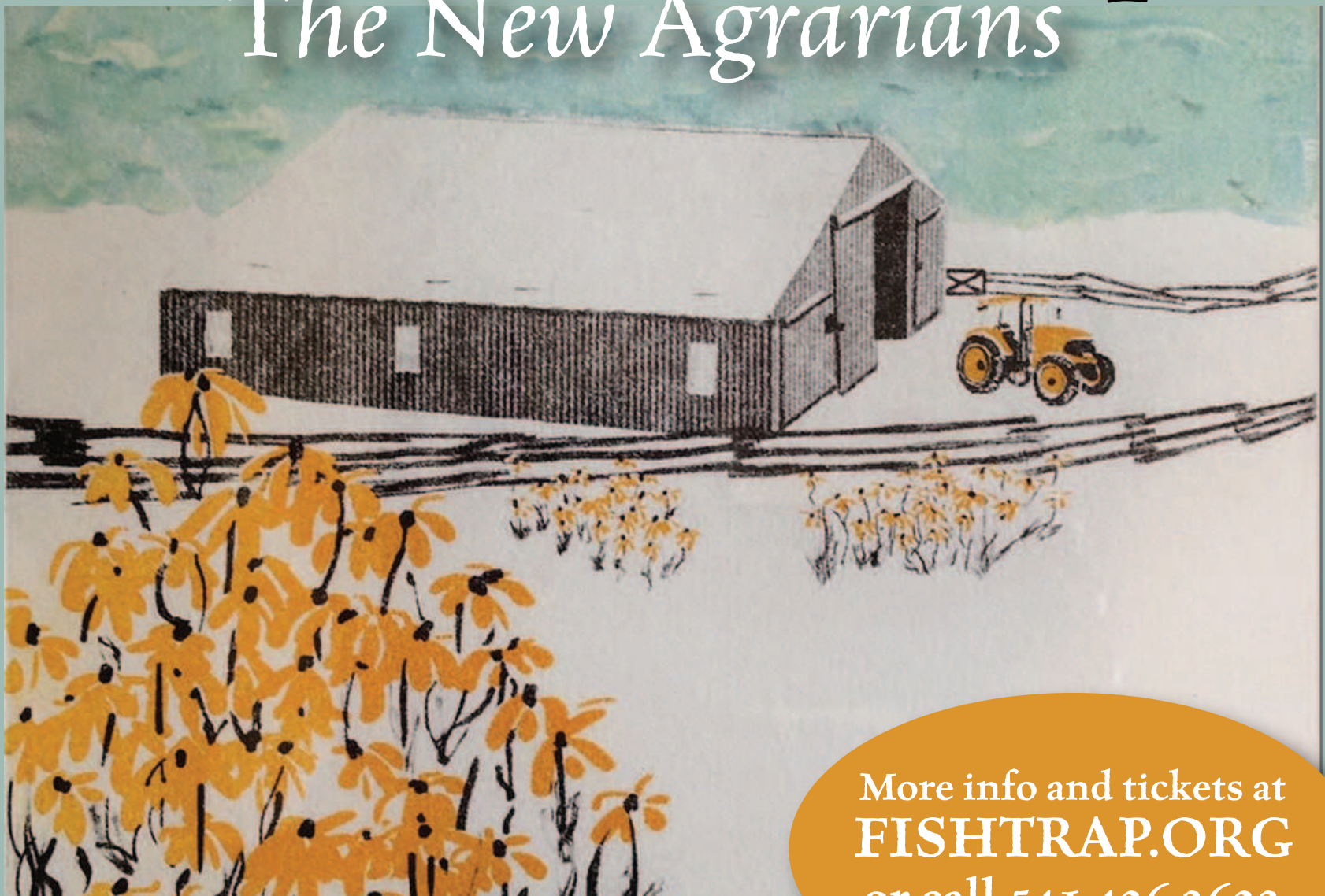
election, which put President Donald Trump in office.

Since 2009, Senate President Peter Courtney has blocked similar proposals four times in Oregon. Last year, the Salem Democrat said he would support a bill to join the compact, only if the decision was endorsed by Oregon voters.

"I would be open to ... sending the question to the ballot," Courtney said in May. "If you believe in the popular vote, then let the popular vote decide the issue."

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