

County presses for action on Morgan Nesbit

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE

Aggressive action to improve forest health, forest habitat, the local economy and to reduce the chance of catastrophic wildfire was recommended in a letter approved by the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners at its Wednesday, March 17, meeting.

The letter, addressed to Mark Bingman, of the U.S. Forest Service Wallowa Mountains Office in Joseph, targets the Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project about 20 miles southeast of Joseph. The project is comprised of about 87,000 acres, located on both the Wallowa Valley Ranger District and the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area.

"I think it's important that the county has established its coordination status with the Forest Service on this project and that we stay in touch with them at every point during the process," said Katy Nesbitt, the county's director of natural resources and economic development who prepared the letter.

She told the commission-

ers there was one unusual change in protocol with the process, in that anonymous comments were being accepted.

"I think the letter we have is, in my opinion, fine, but my question to you is have we contacted anyone to find out why this new protocol of anonymous comments?" Commissioner Susan Roberts asked.

Commissioner Todd Nash also was curious.

"I was surprised to see that in an email recently," he said.

Nesbitt expressed her willingness to look into it.

"You can direct me what you want me to do," she said.

"I think we need to ask someone ... as to why this change in protocol is there that's not been there before," Roberts said. "I think we need to know in order to at least answer the opinions in there."

The commissioners approved sending the letter, and at the same time directed Nesbitt to check into the change in protocol.

In the letter, the commissioners expressed their concern that the Morgan Nesbit is a high-priority area



U.S. Forest Service/Contributed Photo

The Morgan Nesbit Forest Resiliency Project is located about 20 miles southeast of Joseph. The Wallowa County Board of Commissioners gave its approval Wednesday, March 17, 2021, to a prescoping comment letter on plans to improve the forest health of the region.

for reducing fuel loads and agreed with a 2019 state report recommending "treatment on 40% of a landscape can significantly alter fire behavior."

The commissioners also expressed concern for the forest ecosystem health. Fir and pine stands are becoming more at risk due to pandemic insect outbreaks as temperatures warm. The conditions affect fish, wildlife and soil health.

"We believe mechanical treatments and prescribed fire can help reset natural processes and increase

groundwater and stream levels," the letter stated.

The commissioners want "natural fire" returned to the Morgan Nesbit "before essential habitat is consumed by escaped wildfire."

The letter noted that the Morgan Nesbit "has a higher lightning-strike density than any other area on the north end of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest," making such concerns paramount.

The commissioners offered the help of the county's Natural Resource Advisory Committee and urged

the Forest Service partner with the Oregon Department of Forestry, local youth crews and contractors to supplement data gathering, inventory, monitoring, timber marking and monitoring.

The letter also recommended managing with fire-tolerant species of trees.

"Ponderosa pine and Western larch are currently threatened by grand fir and Douglas fir that normally would be controlled if more natural fire were present," it stated.

It urged removing grand fir and Douglas fir by prescribed fire and mechanical means and aggressively removing white and grand fir seed sources.

A 20-year time frame for implementation of the management project was recommended.

The letter also mentioned the high quality of fish habitat in the area, "along with other ESA (Endangered Species Act)-listed and rare and endemic species" that evolved with the "dynamics of natural fire, but is now threatened by the highly altered fire regime."

It also mentioned the economic and recreation values

to the area, as it's important for accessing food sources for people and wildlife and is popular for camping and off-road vehicle adventures. The proximity to communities in the Wallowa Valley makes it an important area for firewood gathering, a necessary source of heat for many here.

"Finally," the letter stated, "we want to see the project designed in such a way that our local contractors and mill can have some benefit from the harvested logs, providing jobs, purchases at local retail stores and the benefit of those dollars circulating throughout the community."

The letter also noted the availability of the county's timber resources.

"The 2016 Wallowa County Forest Management Plan identifies 209,950 acres on the Wallowa Valley and Eagle Cap Ranger Districts and 39,000 acres on the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area as available, capable and suitable for timber production," it stated. "From these acres, timber harvests should occur on 12,448 acres with an estimated 40 million board feet being removed annually."

Commissioners hear update on fiber connections

County hopes to connect all facilities in Enterprise

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Wallowa County is hoping to take a positive step in upgrading its communications network this year, as it connects all county services in Enterprise via fiber optic cable, the county commissioners were told at their Wednesday, March 17, meeting.

Stacey Fregulia, information technology specialist for the county, gave a status report on bids and work to connect the Wallowa County Courthouse with the county's Justice Center, the road department and the Cloverleaf Hall.

"As the commissioners

are aware, I've been working on replacing a lot of the infrastructure between here and the Justice Center," she said. "The only piece that's missing is the fiber connection between the two, and actually not just the Justice Center, but the Cloverleaf Hall and the road department."

She told the commissioners there is an opportunity to increase the capacity of the internet services used by the county from 20-by-20 to 50-by-50. She explained that means upload by download and the numbers represent megabytes.

"Currently, the courthouse operates comfortably (with internet) on that — we don't have an issue," Fregulia said, but the 20-by-20 is not sufficient for the road department.

Also, when power outages occur — as they often do — the road department

has trouble.

"They lose their phone; they lose their internet and lose all options down there," she said.

She anticipates connecting the road department will eliminate many of those problems.

"The plan is to link all of our sites in Enterprise together by fiber, which will make it redundant, so if one of those fibers happens to get cut at any point it will be able to pass through the other," she said.

It is not yet known when the project, which has been underway since July, will be completed. Commissioner John Hillock asked if it could be done by this summer, but Fregulia said that depends on how soon Ziplly completes its work installing the fiberoptic cables.

"They have a lot more now than they did last year," she said.

Fregulia said the county can get internet at the four facilities connected for \$1,300 a month without installation costs through Ziplly Fiber, which currently handles the courthouse phone system. If the county ceases using service from Eastern Oregon Net Inc., Fregulia can program the courthouse phones online.

She had been discussing the upgrades with EONI, but that company gave estimates of approximately \$50,000 to run fiber underground between the courthouse and Justice Center, another \$8,000 to the Cloverleaf and they could not do the road department for less than \$50,000. That doesn't include a \$400-per-month service charge.

No decision on the project was made by the commissioners at the March 17 meeting.

Wallowa supports the replacement of pipeline

City OKs letter to obtain grant for work

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — A letter of support to repair and replace a pipeline to an irrigation ditch was approved by the Wallowa City Council at its meeting Tuesday, March 16.

The request of the letter was made by Elwayne Henderson who wants to obtain a grant to have the work done on a new pipeline for the Chamberlin and Westside irrigation ditches, Mayor Gary Hulse said.

"It does affect the city," Hulse said. "We've had

complaints of water in basements. There also is flooding in the spring."

Hulse said the ditch near Green Hill had been there since the 1960s and originally was a steel pipe, which now has developed leaks.

Hulse wasn't sure who the grant request was to be made to, but said it was a group that has done similar work in Joseph and Enterprise. The council voted to endorse the grant request with a letter.

In another matter at the meeting, the council agreed to transfer \$2,660 from the Senior Center Contingency Fund to the Equipment Fund for a new kitchen range. The current electric range is developing problems, Hulse said, and it was decided to

replace it with a propane range that has a 36-inch grill and two convection ovens.

The mayor said the range will cost more than \$10,000, of which 50% must be paid down prior to ordering it. The Senior Center Equipment Fund has enough to reach the 50% with that which the city is contributing.

"This just gets us to the start," the mayor said.

Hulse said it was an unexpected expense.

"We didn't realize that when we ran our budget last year that we were going to have to replace a stove," he said.

In other matters, the council:

- Discussed ongoing animal control problems that

violated city ordinances. Hulse said the discussion was primarily so the council can start acting on the complaints as they come in.

- Agreed to transfer \$20,609 from the Fire Department Contingency Fund to the Equipment Fund for a new hydraulic extraction tool.

- Heard a report from the Public Works Department that a planned project to clean and scope city sewer lines will begin this week.

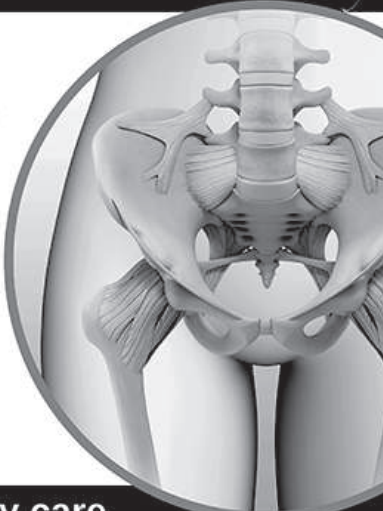
- Voted to appoint Jack Deal to the city Budget Committee.

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