

ROAD

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The Marble Creek Pass road is the only route open to the public that goes through the city's watershed. That 10,000-acre area, which is part of the Wallowa-Whitman, is closed to public entry (hunters are sometimes allowed) to protect water quality.

The city obtains its drinking water from several springs and streams in the watershed, including Marble Springs.

City officials have for more than 25 years worried about the effects should a wildfire burn a significant portion of the watershed, most of which is densely forested.

Most notably, officials fear that a big blaze would foul streams with mud and ash and force the city to build a water filtration plant, which likely would cost more than \$10 million.

(Although the city doesn't have to filter its water to meet federal standards, it does add disinfecting chlorine to the water and subject water to ultraviolet light, which inactivates some parasites, such as cryptosporidium, that are resistant to chlorine.)

There hasn't been a large fire in the watershed for more than a century, but such a blaze likely is overdue, based on a study of fire scars on old trees in the watershed conducted by researchers from the University of Washington in the mid-1990s.

In the late 1990s the Wallowa-Whitman spent more than \$2.2 million to cut trees and light prescribed fires to create fuelbreaks on the fringes of the watershed. Most of the work was on the south end and along the road under which is buried the city's water pipeline, with a goal of giving fire crews a place to head off a blaze moving toward the watershed.

But over the past few years city officials, led by City Council member Arvid Andersen, who is a forestry consultant, and Wallowa-



Wallowa-Whitman National Forest photo

Snowdrifts usually block the approach to Marble Creek Pass until June or early July.

Whitman staff have had multiple meetings to talk about cutting trees in the interior of the watershed to reduce the amount of combustible fuel should a lightning bolt or other ignition start a fire.

Doing that work, however, requires roads to haul the logs, however.

And as Cikanek noted, the Marble Creek Pass road, with its jutting boulders and gullies as deep as two feet, isn't suitable for log trucks.

But paving the way for those trucks — so to speak; the Wallowa-Whitman's plan is to spread gravel on the rebuilt road, not to actually pave it — is only one benefit of the project, Cikanek said.

Improving the road would also speed access to the watershed for firefighters.

"It would be hard to get an engine up there quickly," Cikanek said.

And although the road even its current condition attracts a fair amount of summertime traffic among Elkhorn Crest Trail hikers

and other recreationists, reconstructing the road would make the route accessible to far more vehicles than is the case now, he said.

"The (Elkhorn Crest) trailhead doesn't have the type of access that that quality of trailhead usually has," Cikanek said.

The Wallowa-Whitman is seeking money for the road reconstruction through the Forest Service's capital improvement program.

Cikanek said the project is a high priority for the agency's Regional Office in Portland, and he's optimistic that money will be allocated.

"It's looking very promising," he said.

The City Council on Tuesday voted unanimously to send a letter of support for the project to Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen.

The Wallowa-Whitman's executive summary for the project reads, in part, "The economic and quality of life benefits to Baker County residents from these road

improvements would be very real."

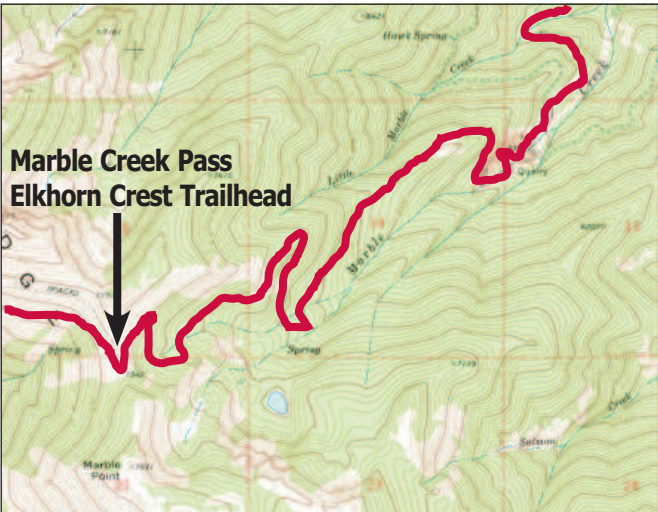
The proposed project, and estimated costs, are:

- Gravel surface, 21-foot width — \$750,000
- Grading and drainage — \$240,000
- Clearing and grubbing trees and vegetation near the road — \$120,000
- Culverts (approximately 30) — \$120,000
- Signs and other improvements at the Elkhorn Crest trailhead — \$40,000

Cikanek said he understands that some people like the road as it is, for the challenge it provides for four-wheel drive vehicles.

But he pointed out that roads in other canyons on the east side of the Elkhorns, including Pine Creek, Rock Creek and the North Powder River, are in similar condition to the Marble Creek Pass road.

The Wallowa-Whitman isn't planning to do major renovations on any of those roads.



The red line shows the Marble Creek Pass road.

Limestone Led To Road

The Marble Creek Pass road was built as a haul route for trucks carrying limestone from a quarry at Baboon Creek, on the west (Sumpter) side of the pass, to a lime-processing plant in Baker Valley near the intersection of Wingville Road and Highway 30, about five miles north of Baker City. There were two such quarries, the other being on the Baker side of the Elkhorns, along Marble Creek, hence the name of the pass.

The two quarries, owned by the Chemical Lime Co., produced an estimated \$8 million in chemical-grade lime between 1957 and 1971, according to a 1989 report, "Limestone Deposits in Oregon," from the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries. The Marble Creek quarry was the first to be mined. It closed in 1963 in part because the limestone deposit was cut by a different type of rock. Chemical Lime then opened the Baboon Creek quarry, which operated from 1963 until 1971, when both the quarry and the processing plant closed. Lower-grade lime from the processing plant is still piled at the site; the bright-white mounds are conspicuous even from the top of Elkhorn Peak, more than 5,500 feet above.

Both quarries tapped deposits of limestone formed from the remains of billions of shellfish that hardened into calcium carbonate at the bottom of a tropical sea about 250 million years ago. The deposits are the biggest in the Elkhorns but only of moderate size for Northeastern Oregon. There are massive outcroppings of limestone in parts of the Wallowa Mountains, including the imposing west face of the Matterhorn, and along the Burnt River, where Ash Grove Cement Co. mines limestone to produce portland cement.

The name "Marble" for the creek and the pass refer to the metamorphic form of limestone. Marble is created when limestone, a sedimentary rock, is subject to heat or pressure, or sometimes both, over millions of years. Some of the rock in the Marble Creek area isn't a true marble, but rather a sort of intermediate stage between limestone and marble.

Mike Upmeyer of Baker City, who died in 2010, told the Herald in 1995 that he drove limestone-laden trucks over the pass in 1970 and 1971. "We just locked up the trailer and let it slide," he said, referring to places where the grade reaches 15 percent, more than twice as steep as Ladd Canyon on Interstate 84. One driver was killed in October 1968 when his truck plunged off the road.

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