

FOREST

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many organizations help provide the other half through the required local match. He said the projects include prescribed burning, stream restoration, pre-commercial thinning, fencing and other wildlife, vegetation, hydrology and range projects.

The collaborative includes both timber industry professionals and environmentalists that have traditionally been at odds over forest management policies. Beverlin said the science-backed, solutions-based approach has been successful on the Malheur.

“We’re the only forest in the nation that’s tripled our timber target in the last four years. We’re the only forest in the nation I know of that has not had a vegetation management project litigated in the past four years. We’re the only forest in the nation that nearly doubled the size of their CFLR project. With the collaborative’s assistance, we’ve brought in more funding in the community to do more work in the community to provide more stability of forest products in the community to the mill,” he said. “(The collaborative process is) really the proven method to work through those sticky issues and continue to get work done and not come to a stalemate and have things stop.”

From laissez-faire to litigation

At one point, a large volume of timber — about 200 million board feet each year — was being harvested from the Malheur, BMFP Executive Director Mark Webb said, adding many industrial professionals would agree that amount was not sustainable.

In the mid-1990s, however, the U.S. Forest Service implemented a new screening protocol, the Eastside Screens, on forests east of the Cascade Mountains in Oregon and Washington to protect old growth forest areas, according to a chronology by U.S. Forest Service silviculturist David Powell.

Among other new guide-

lines, the screens prohibited cutting trees larger than 21 inches in diameter, which reduced the annual volume harvested.

The Eastside Screens also provided new legal footing for environmentalists to challenge proposed timber projects. Webb said litigation became common and slowed the pace of projects, which hurt the resource-based economy in Grant County while allowing the forest to become overgrown and more prone to catastrophic wildfires.

In 2002, the annual timber harvest was down to 3 million board feet.

From enemies to partners

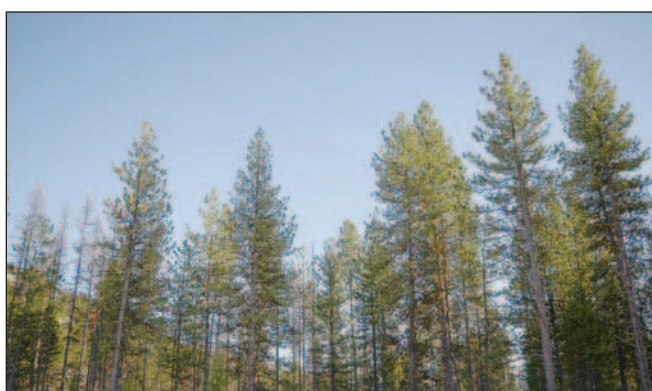
Susan Jane Brown, an environmental attorney, said she began working on issues in Grant County in 2003, representing several conservation organizations. She said, although she was quite successful in stopping projects with lawsuits, wildfires would often destroy the areas she was trying to protect.

“Litigation is a great tool for stopping things from happening, but it’s not a very good tool to compel good actions to happen,” she said. “As a conservation community, we were losing a lot of wildlife habitat we worked to preserve.”

Grant County Commissioner Boyd Britton approached Brown at a forest plan revision meeting in 2003 and said he wanted to discuss moving beyond litigation toward a more sustainable outcome for the community.

Brown said the discussions started small. Slowly, more people joined in, and although there were many points of disagreement, she said they started to find common ground to move forward. The Blue Mountains Forest Partners collaborative was formalized in 2006 with members representing the timber industry and environmentalists.

“Following the science and being true to our values really meant that it made sense in this particular situation to engage with these diverse stakeholders,” Brown said. “There was just a convergence of agreement that working together



The Eagle/Sean Hart

The Malheur National Forest on Dixie Butte west of Prairie City. An additional \$1.5 million — for a total of \$4 million this year — has been awarded by the federal government for Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration projects on the Malheur forest.

was going to get us where we wanted to go faster and better than litigation. Ultimately, I think we’ll be more successful than the back and forth that has characterized forest management in the past.”

From closure to consistency

Webb said it took the collaborative several years to reach a consensus for its first project, which was only about 6,000 acres. Through the years, however, the collaborative developed “zones of agreement” that could be applied for projects across wide swaths of the forest, he said.

In 2012, the Blue Mountains Forest Partners teamed up with the Harney County Collaborative to create the Southern Blues Restoration Coalition to apply for the federal Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration funding, which was awarded at \$2.5 million per year.

When Malheur Lumber, the last sawmill in Grant County, announced it would be closing in 2012, the Forest Service was able to accelerate timber sales and increase the pace of restoration work.

With enough wood, the mill was never forced to close and still employs about 100 people, said Bruce Daucavage, president of Malheur Lumber’s parent company Ochoco Lumber.

“The Blue Mountain collaborative work in general has given us a new lease on life with our John Day sawmill,”

he said. “With the good work they’ve put forward, we’ve been able to have assurances that an ample supply of wood would be available to our mill. I cannot tell you how important it was for us to have all these people work on these projects that were so interested and committed to our communities. We could not, under any circumstances, do this on our own.”

From decreases to increases

When the collaborative was established in 2006, it covered about 690,000 acres of the 1.7 million-acre Malheur National Forest.

The CFLR report from 2014 shows it created or maintained 113 jobs with direct labor income of \$4,522,167.

Information from the collaborative in 2015 states more than 68,500 acres of hazardous fuels were reduced and more than 15,500 acres of wildlife habitat was restored.

Beverlin, the forest supervisor, said the collaborative was so successful they wanted to expand their efforts to increase the pace and scale of restoration over a larger area. In 2015, an expansion to more than 1 million acres was approved, he said, the largest increase of any CFLR project in the nation.

In 2016, the collaborative’s CFLR funding was increased from \$2.5 million per year to the maximum \$4 million possible.

In 2002, only 3 million

board feet were harvested and sold from the Malheur. Sales increased to 39 million by 2010 and up to 70 million in 2014. Sales were down to 43 million in 2015 due to the Canyon Creek Complex fire but are projected to be 75 million for 2016 and the foreseeable future, Beverlin said.

The collaborative’s work has received praise at the national level.

“It’s no accident the harvest on the Malheur National Forest tripled over the past few years,” U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon said in a statement. “It took hard work by industry, community and environmental partners, working through the Southern Blues Restoration Coalition, who got the cut up in an ecologically responsible way. I am pleased the Forest Service has recognized the value of their work by adding \$1.5 million to this successful collaboration. The collaborative is a national model for using the best available science to restore the forests and maintain timber jobs.”

From outside the circle

Not everyone is pleased with the collaborative, however.

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer deputized 11 people to create an independent natural resources plan for Grant County in September 2015. The sheriff introduced the plan to the Grant County Court during an opportunity for public comment and attempted to invoke coordination with the Forest Service. Coordination is a law that requires the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to work with local governments on how public lands are managed.

“I want a seat at the table,” Palmer told the commissioners. “The people I represent are not getting heard. I’m not getting heard.”

Ultimately, the commissioners did not adopt the sheriff’s natural resources plan, and Palmer did not attend a work session with Beverlin and the commissioners about the issue. The commissioners ruled the sheriff had no authority to invoke coordination and told Forest Service officials

the County Court was the official government agency with which to coordinate.

Frances Preston, one of the natural resources deputies, said she has attended several Forest Partners meetings in the last year and the most recent meeting in March. She said she was surprised by how comfortable everyone in the room — environmentalists, Forest Service personnel, timber industry professionals and others — were with each other.

Preston said she believed the group should be comprised of more local people than outside organizations.

“There’s not very many little guys that are there that are going to be able to get any of this money,” she said. “That’s my problem. I feel that there needs to be more local people around the table.”

Preston said it made her uncomfortable “because only a few people are getting the benefit of the dollar, because they’re the ones that are around that table.” She also said people believe the Forest Partners make back-room deals with Forest Service officials.

The BMFP Operations Manual specifically prohibits its back-room deals and outlines the membership process, which is open to anyone who attends a certain number of meetings, adheres to guidelines and signs a declaration of commitment.

However, Preston said attending the meetings can be difficult for many small business people, because the collaborative goes on full-day field trips to analyze upcoming project areas and half-day field trips to monitor previous projects each month.

The group also meets from 4-7 p.m. the third Thursday of each month at the airport in John Day, and Webb, the executive director, said anyone is welcome to attend to learn about or participate in the collaborative.

Preston said she could agree with what the collaborative is trying to accomplish “if they were bringing in everyone.” She said she plans to attend future meetings and to become an official member.

PLAN

Continued from Page A1

meetings was to adopt a more “hands-on” approach to land management that would make the forests safer, more resilient and productive.

“These alternatives really try to do that, and they try to

do it at a different pace and scale,” Montoya said.

Comments made at the public meetings also emphasized the need to protect watersheds and the environment, Montoya said. Any new restoration proposals would still have to comply with existing laws, making forest management an exer-

cise in compromise.

Forest plans are the guiding script for achieving goals and desired conditions in each national forest. Though the Blue Mountains Forest Plan is being authored under one umbrella, each forest will have its own individual plan. All together, the Blue Mountain forests comprise 4.9 million acres across Eastern Oregon and southeast Washington.

The plan has three stated goals: to promote ecological integrity, social well-being and economic benefits. While it does not approve any specific management projects, it does set numerous desired conditions for things like fire protection, recreation, access, scenery and timber harvest.

The Forest Service typically updates forest plans every 10-15 years to account for new science. However, the current Blue Mountains plan hasn’t been revised since 1990.

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