

New timeline for revised Blue Mountains Forest Plan

By George Plaven
EO Media Group



Eagle file photo

The Strawberry Mountains from Keeney Fork Road on the Malheur National Forest in Grant County. A final environmental impact statement may be ready by the end of June for the Blue Mountains Forest Plan revision.

It may be 12 years overdue, but the U.S. Forest Service is inching closer to revising the outdated Blue Mountains Forest Plan.

A final environmental impact statement, or EIS, may be ready by the end of June, according to Victoria Anne, revision team leader. The final EIS was expected before the end of 2016, though staff turnover has further delayed what has already been a lengthy process.

In addition, the Forest Service has crafted two new plan alternatives based on a year's worth of feedback from local communities and stakeholders. When completed, the Blue Mountains Forest Plan will

form the backbone for land management on the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests.

But there is still plenty of work left to do, even after the agency's environmental analysis is finished.

Tom Montoya, Wal-

lowa-Whitman National Forest supervisor, said there will be a 90-day objection period after the final EIS is issued, and it could take six months or more to work through objections.

Certainly, the plan has proven a lightning rod for controversy since a draft environmental

analysis was released in 2014. While not a decision-making document in and of itself, it does set desired conditions for everything in the woods from fire protection and logging to wilderness and road access.

The proposal drew so much fire that the Forest Service decided to take a step back in 2015 and re-engage through a series of public meetings. Through that process, Montoya said officials heard from locals who wanted to see them pick up the pace and scale of restoration to make the forests more healthy, while also protecting old growth trees.

That's what the two new alternatives will seek to address in different ways, Montoya said.

"We continue to have that dialogue," he said.

The Forest Service was on track to have the final EIS out last fall, but the timeline has since been stretched out to later this year. Part of the delay, Montoya said, was the departure of former team leader Sabrina Stadler, who left in August.

Stadler died on Sept. 7, 2016, due to complications with pancreatitis. Michael Hampton, a retired Forest Service employee, filled the role of team leader on an interim basis until Anne arrived on the job in mid-December.

The team also recently brought on a new fisheries biologist to lead consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on complying with the federal Endangered Species Act — primarily for

Snake River salmon, steelhead and bull trout.

"We've been trying our best to temporarily fill some of those gaps," Montoya said.

Though the Blue Mountains Forest Plan is being studied under one umbrella, each of the three forests will have its own individual plan. The final decision will come down to Regional Forester Jim Peña in the Forest Service's Portland headquarters.

Montoya said the two new alternatives could more than double the pace of restoration being done on the forests. The question is how and where that restoration will be addressed.

"We're trying to make sure we're being responsive as much as possible, meeting with folks who want to help us with this," Montoya said.

E. Oregon job growth expected to trail behind state through 2024

By Claire Withycombe
Capital Bureau

Job growth in Oregon's rural areas — particularly south-eastern Oregon — is projected to trail behind the rest of the fast-growing state until 2024, according to the Oregon Employment Department.

Oregon's jobs are expected to grow 14 percent between 2014 and 2024, more than double the national expected rate for that period.

But in Harney and Malheur counties, the number of jobs is expected to increase merely 3 percent until 2024. That's compared to 6 and 7 percent in neighboring counties to the north and west, which is a rate on par with expected job growth nationally.

Counties near the central Columbia River Gorge, meanwhile, are expected to see 11 percent job growth until 2024.

The outlook comes in the broader context of the slow post-recession jobs recovery in rural areas of the state.

While Oregon as a whole has made up the jobs it lost during the Great Recession, that's not the case for many of the state's rural areas — such as Gilliam and Wheeler counties.

But the future may be brighter for them: Both are projected to exceed the country's jobs growth rate until 2024.

Construction, health care and professional and business services jobs are expected to grow the fastest, according to a presentation employment department officials made to lawmakers on the state's workforce committee Thursday.

The high-tech sector is also expected to continue growing — a recent dip in jobs can be attributed to layoffs in the semiconductor industry, but the overall trend is upward, said Nick Beleiciks, a state employment economist with the Oregon Employment Department.

Filling those new jobs may be a challenge in rural Oregon, too, though.

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second-poorest connectivity in Oregon with average download speeds less than 10 megabits per second and upload speeds of less than one megabit per second.

John Day Mayor Ron Lundbom said he supported Green's development plan and thought improving internet access is key to attracting new residents.

"I think that's the way he wants to grow our tax base, by giving amenities and services that we don't already have, by trying to attract people who are going to bring their expertise and entrepreneurship," Lundbom said.

An internet task force has been set up to address the problem. Consisting of six members, including Green and Grant County Judge Scott Myers, the task force is working towards establishing fast and reliable internet for residents and local businesses.

The task force recently had its first meeting and is working to help John Day join the rest of the world in terms of broadband access, Myers said.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden addressed concerns from the community about the quality and cost of internet in the county holding back local communities during a town hall meeting on Feb. 9. He said he recently met with Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit



The Eagle/Fylan Boggs

A water tank above John Day.

Varadaraj Pai, who wants to expand broadband access in unserved and under-served areas.

"We need to get service to every corner of America, especially our rural areas," Walden said.

Green also wants to raise awareness of what the area has to offer new residents through a digital marketing and branding campaign, and he wants to move forward on recreation projects like a proposed Seventh Street Park Complex bike track.

If these methods attract people to the city, a wider range of housing options across a broad price range will be needed. Fifty percent of homes built in the city were built prior to 1960, and less than 1 percent rentals are vacant, Green said.

One resource the city may be able to use to attract development is its water supply. Water sales are the largest revenue source for John Day, bringing in roughly \$600,000 a year, Green said,

and the city has the infrastructure in place to provide more than 10 times the average daily demand.

Although state law requires water revenues to be deposited into a dedicated water fund that can only be spent on the water system, Green said the city may have options to promote economic development with the resource. He said, if the city waived water fees for certain sectors, such as government agencies, and instead charged them an economic development fee, those funds could be used for projects not related to the water system.

Green said the city could also provide water rate incentives to attract "thirsty" industries or amenities, such as a botanical garden and recreational resort similar to the 80-acre Oregon Garden in Silverton.

"Beyond the cost of operations and maintenance, the highest and best use of the city's residual water revenue would be to increase the population of the service area in order to maximize taxpayers return on investment," Green wrote in memo to the city council.

Green has also proposed a creative plan for a new wastewater treatment plant incorporating a hydroponic garden. The plant would use reclaimed water to grow cash crops to offset the cost of building and operating the plant.

A feasibility study is planned for 2017 to determine if the hydroponic plant is the best option for the city.

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