

# Ranchers receive biological ultimatum

There was a time when Americans could expect their federal government to offer service that was both even-handed and helpful. Even timely.

They may not have gotten it, but at least the expectation was there.

That has changed, for many of those who now work in government, and for those who depend on the government to treat them fairly.

An article in last week's Eagle illustrates that change. It's not that the U.S. Forest Service wanted to force ranchers whose cattle graze on the Malheur National Forest to accept a biological opinion that would dictate the conditions. The Forest Service produced the 335-page document just as ranchers were preparing to turn out their cattle on the 1.7 million-acre forest. The catch: They couldn't move their cattle until they agreed to the biological opinion.

The ranchers, who pay about \$200,000 for the use of 111 allotments, saw the situation as an ultimatum, and it was. By producing the biological opinion at the last moment, that conclusion was inescapable.

The Forest Service, however, maintains that the reason for the tardiness of the document is that it is short-handed. No doubt, some staffers are also tied up in legal matters, such as defending against environmental lawsuits filed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The ESA is a law that allows environmental groups to sue federal agencies over more than 1,661 populations of fish, wildlife and plants currently listed as threatened or endangered. In the case of the Malheur National Forest, the population of steelhead was the subject of the biological opinion. It should be noted that, according to the Forest Service, 4,500 to 20,000 steelhead live in streams and rivers within the national forest for part of their life cycle. It should also be noted that sport fisher-

men around Oregon reported catching more than 15,000 summer and winter steelhead in the 2017-18 season. The fish is not exactly on the verge of extinction.

As it is now written, the ESA is little more than a hammer that environmentalists can use to drive ranchers off federal land, stop all types of development and raise money. Only a few populations have been taken off the list, often over the objections of environmental groups.

Because of this poorly written law, federal agencies such as the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service are short-staffed. When President Richard Nixon signed the ESA into law in the 1970s, he probably had no idea it would become a litigation generator that turned scientists and land managers into defendants. Instead of doing their jobs, they are being dragged into court.

But there's also an "embedded bureaucracy" in the federal government that, instead of carrying out the law, carries out its own agenda, according to U.S. Rep. Greg Walden, R-Oregon, whose district includes the Malheur National Forest.

"Some of this has been going on for decades, and there's a lot of momentum behind it," he said.

All of which is illustrated by the biological ultimatum — er, opinion — delivered to ranchers in May. The ranchers could have rejected it and been without summer grazing for the year, or they could have accepted it. Even with tighter restrictions on grass height, having a place to graze is better than the alternative of buying hay.

Had the biological opinion been delivered in a timely manner that would allow a thoughtful analysis, the ranchers would have felt as though they were being treated in an even-handed and helpful manner.

As it turned out, the treatment was neither.



## First round of objection-resolution meetings deemed positive step

By Glenn Casamassa  
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Dear objectors, interested persons, and Blue Mountains community members:

I recently had the privilege of meeting many of you during the first round of objection-resolution meetings for the Blue Mountains Revised Forest Plans. I want to sincerely thank everyone who participated. Over 300 objectors, interested persons and public observers attended meetings in John Day, Pendleton, Wallowa, Baker City and La Grande. I am grateful for the time and effort invested by each of you. I hope you will agree that this first round of resolution meetings was a positive step.

The meetings were led by objection reviewing officers based in Washington, D.C., with support and coordination from the Pacific Northwest Regional Office as well as the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests. The goal for these initial meetings was to bring clarity and mutual understanding to the Blue Mountains Forest Plan objection issues. The dialogue helped Forest Service leadership and staff to better understand your values, concerns and views.

Spending time in Eastern Oregon improved much more than our understanding of the issues identified in the objections, though. Through our initial discussions we also gained a deeper appreciation



Glenn Casamassa

of local residents' special relationships with the land. We had it affirmed that, for many of those who live in and around the Blue Mountains, these national forests are not just places to visit and recreate — the forests are a vital part of your community life, identity, heritage and livelihoods. The Forest Service is striving to honor these special relationships in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan's resolution process. In doing so, we will better respect the views of many different community members — including our tribal neighbors, the states of Oregon and Washington, county and other local government representatives, user groups, environmental groups, industry and business — all of whom seek assurances that the Forest Service will protect their priority resources.

During the initial meetings the Forest Service heard a lot about a wide range of topics, including access; aquatic and riparian conservation; elk security and bighorn sheep; fire and fuels; fish, wildlife and plants; livestock grazing; local government cooperation and coordination; public participation; social and economic issues; timber and vegetation; and wilderness, backcountry and other special areas. Digging into these topics in person gave the Forest Service the

opportunity to explore issues that were not as prominent in the written objection letters. From the dialogue, some issues appear to be close to resolution while others will require further discussion, so there will be more steps to take in this process.

The Forest Service knows that many topics are interrelated, and we will work to pull together the related topics for discussion in future meetings, so all of us can better see the connections and consider the trade-offs of potential resolutions. The Forest Service also understands that not all objectors and interested persons were able to attend the first round of meetings or have their voices represented by others. So, as we navigate these next steps, the Forest Service will work to ensure we are as inclusive as possible in future objection-resolution meetings.

Over the coming weeks the reviewing officers will be studying the notes and reflecting on what we heard in the first round of resolution meetings, and we will be helping the Washington Office in scheduling the next round of objection-resolution meetings. We will be in touch again to announce the next steps. Thank you for your contributions, and I look forward to making more progress together in the near future.

*Glenn Casamassa is the regional forester for the Pacific Northwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service.*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Access restrictions could harm tourism

To the Editor:

Follow me on this imaginary trip scenario. I meet this guy from Oregon at a friend's wedding in California. We share a common interest in hunting sports. He sells me on the idea to hunt trophy mule deer on public lands in the Malheur National Forest. It sounds so enticing that I am buying my camo and camping gear on eBay the next day. I apply for the non-resident hunting license and application for the draw, which because of the exorbitant price I am practically guaranteed a fun-filled trip into the panoramic mountains of Eastern Oregon.

The notice of a successful draw has arrived, and my trip north commences. I have washed my new duds in scent killer and sprayed UV killer all over the exposed surface. I drive up into the hills, set up camp, find a spot to park a short distance up an unmarked road adjoining a gravel

road with no Forest Service "advisory sign" in sight, jump out of my rig, spray premium deer urine all over my body with a misdirected mist to my face, struggle into my screaming orange "can you see me now?" hunting vest and I am ready to go. I lick my lips with anticipation, wonder why my mouth now tastes like deer urine, load my rifle and I am off.

Later, exhausted from trudging through waist-deep brush and steep inclines, I return to my vehicle to find a greeting from law enforcement advising me that I have trespassed on a closed road and some federal judge in Pendleton has an opening on his agenda to fine me a sizable sum for my transgression.

Prior to my trip, I had thoroughly read the Oregon Hunting Regulations, which, though thicker to wade through than cattle yard muck, were fairly straightforward. I had no advanced warning of massive access restrictions until I could hunt up a local Forest Service office or notice a sign board alongside the road.

I probably won't be back. An antelope hunt in Wyoming is call-

ing my name.

Judy Kerr  
Canyon City

### Can someone tell me why?

To the Editor:

If the U.S. Postal Service delivers mail for free to rural households or a city has free street delivery, why must I pay for a mailbox housed at the post office?

Relatives in a nearby state have their mailbox for free!

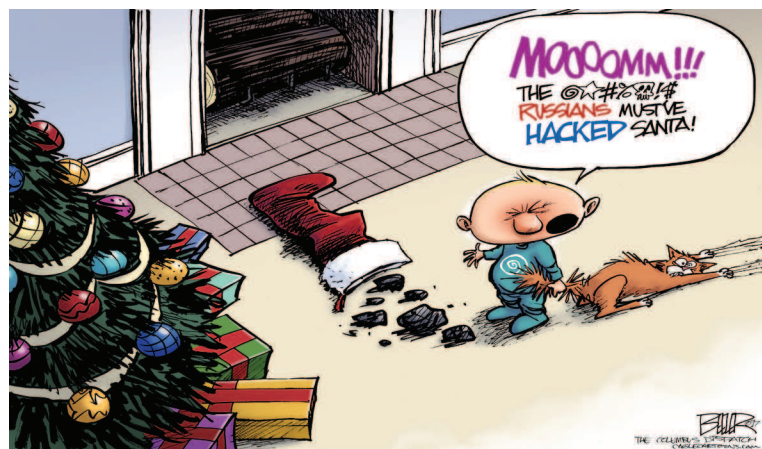
As I understand, every American is entitled to free mail delivery.

Free is a dangerous thing. The USPS is in the red. That's why the stamps are increasing again. That's why my box rent is increasing again.

If everyone paid a mere amount annually of \$10 for the currently free delivery, then the burden would not be on the few.

So can someone explain why we can't address the inequity in this antiquated system?

Nicky Blackwell  
Long Creek



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**Blue Mountain EAGLE**  
Published every Wednesday by  
EC MEDIA group

### Grant County's Weekly Newspaper

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(including online access)  
Grant County .....\$40  
Everywhere else in U.S. ....\$51  
Outside Continental U.S. ....\$60

Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

**POSTMASTER** send address changes to: Blue Mountain Eagle 195 N. Canyon Blvd. John Day, OR 97845-1187 USPS 226-340

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