

Court presents requests for Austin Project

Scoping period ends Aug. 7

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County Court expressed an interest in coordinating with Malheur National Forest during a scoping presentation for the proposed Austin Project on July 24.

Commissioner Sam Palmer asked to be shown around the project area with a Forest Service silviculturist or fuels reduction expert on hand.

Malheur National Forest Supervisor Craig Trulock and NEPA planner Kate Cueno reacted in a positive way to Palmer's request, along with comments and questions from the court and the public, inviting them to a July 30 open house for more detailed information.

Project plans

The Austin Project covers 78,200 acres encompassing the entire Bridge Creek-Middle Fork John Day River watershed and the headwaters of the Middle Fork, according to a Forest Service scoping briefing. Planning began in 2017, and a 30-day scoping period for public comment ends Aug. 7.

The project goals are to promote watershed health and resiliency, maintain and improve diverse forest composition, improve wildlife habitat, promote forest conditions that allow for reintroduction of fire upon the landscape, move toward a



From left, Malheur National Forest project planner Kate Cueno and Supervisor Craig Trulock update the Grant County Court on the Austin Project on July 24.

safe and sustainable minimum road system and contribute to the region's social and economic vitality.

Upland restoration work includes about 28,000 acres of commercial thinning, 6,500 acres of biomass treatments and 900 acres of non-commercial thinning near private land and highways. About 3,240 acres in the wildland-urban interface will see fuel reduction work.

Prescribed burning is planned for 76,700 acres in blocks to reduce fuels and invasive plant species. Road maintenance and reconstruction will take place for needed haul routes, and about 43 miles of temporary roads will be constructed to access some commercial harvest units.

Road system changes

include closing 57 miles of currently open roads, returning 11 miles of existing roads that had been decommissioned to closed-road status, converting 1.2 miles to trail, opening 5.9 miles of currently closed or decommissioned roads, relocating 1.2 miles of Forest Road 2620, decommissioning 13 miles of currently open or closed roads and confirming the closure of 31 miles of roads that were administratively closed in the past.

Watershed and fisheries activities include restoring about 2,820 acres of stream and floodplain and 670 acres of riparian meadow at 30 areas. Unique habitat work includes 330 acres of aspen restoration and 510 acres of mountain mahogany and upland meadow restoration.

Recreational development plans include 4.6 miles of new trail construction to extend the Sumpter Valley Railroad Interpretive Site trail and for the proposed Bridge Creek Trail, which will also get a new trailhead. A fuels reduction project is planned for the Dixie Creek Campground.

Issues raised

Trulock responded to Commissioner Jim Hamsher's request to delay the scoping deadline by 15 days by noting that additional public input periods and opportunities for developing alternatives will follow scoping.

About 70% of the forest work will be offered first to Iron Triangle, which holds a 10-year stewardship con-



tract, Trulock said. Judge Scott Myers asked if more of the work could be offered to other bidders because the county doesn't receive a share of timber receipts from the stewardship contract.

Trulock noted that the forest work will take place after Iron Triangle's 10-year contract ends three years from now, so the contract could be modified. He also said he would look at making downed and piled logs available for firewood and Palmer's request to make burned trees available for salvage after fires.

Billy Jo George asked the Forest Service to take another look at trees in the Crawford Creek area seriously damaged by a prescribed burn. She requested mechanical treatment rather than prescribed fire for that area.

Cueno noted that most of the project's prescribed burning will not take place for 9-10 years. Jim Sproul asked the Forest Service

to "think outside the box," choosing more selective logging over prescribed fire. Cueno, however, said the Forest Service goal is to restore a natural fire regime to the area as a way to prevent catastrophic wildfires.

Sproul also suggested many of the roads proposed for closure were built prior to 1976 and are protected under Revised Statute 2477. Cueno disagreed and said any designation would need to go through a court process. Trulock agreed with Cueno but noted that he wants to work with the county on any roads the county believes are protected under RS 2477.

George noted that a historic road and part of the Sumpter Valley Railroad will be impacted by fish restoration plans. She also expressed concerns about a proposed road closure that would eliminate an emergency evacuation route for residents and visitors in the Bates State Park and Austin area.

Bates Pond project moving forward

Construction bids could be solicited by 2020

By Richard Hanners
Blue Mountain Eagle

Design work is underway for the dam and former mill pond at Bates State Park, and construction bids could be let out in fall 2020, according to Scott Nebeker, a park development administrator for the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

About \$200,000 was included in OPRD's last biennial budget for design and permitting of the pond project, he told the Grant County Court on July 24. OPRD has budgeted another \$3 million for the project in the next biennium, he said.

Public information meetings will be held next year as the final design work proceeds, he said. Construction could begin in spring or summer 2021, but those dates are highly dependent on project funding and permitting, he said.

Historic legacy

The county court recognized the importance of the historic mill site and popular recreation pond in 2007 when it backed a \$400,000 loan so the Bates Park and Museum Foundation could purchase the former town and mill sites for a future park.

The state purchased the land from the county for \$406,612 in lottery funds, and plans for a state park progressed quickly under Gov. Ted Kulongoski's "park-a-year" plan.

But a political division formed between passionate supporters of culture, history and recreation and equally passionate supporters of native fish and free-flowing streams.

The latter were concerned about protecting two native fish — spring chinook salmon and summer steelhead. Steelhead are listed under the Endangered Species Act. Critics of the project



Peaceful and still, the deep blue water of Bates Pond is a refreshing sight while meandering the trail that encircles the pond and others throughout Bates State Park.



The fish ladder at Bates Pond. The ladder would be improved or replaced under a plan to retain the pond and improve fish passage.



The Eagle/Richard Hanners
Scott Nebeker from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department updated the Grant County Court on the Bates Pond project on July 24.

said the existing fish ladder was not adequate for migrating fish and stream water from Bridge Creek was warmed by the pond, threatening downstream habitat for cold-water fish.

Construction of the new state park began in June 2011. About 4,000 trees and shrubs were planted and a riparian area with a meandering stream was restored where Bridge Creek enters the Middle Fork. The park opened three months later and was soon seeing 20,000 visitors a year.

Pond debate

The issue of the pond and dam, however, was not settled. Collaborative meetings of stakeholders and interested parties led by a

hired facilitator took place three times in 2016 without reaching a consensus.

A stronger consensus developed over the next year and a half, and sideboards were established for a meeting in March 2018. The group agreed at the meeting to move forward with an option that called for constructing a bypass channel on the west side of the pond so most of the stream flow from Bridge Creek could reach the Middle Fork without warming up.

The option also called for shrinking the pond's footprint while deepening the pond by dredging as much as six feet of silt. The fish ladder would be replaced with a new one that was less steep

and had larger pools.

Nebeker told the county court July 24 the goal is to improve fish passage while creating a pond that is not static and clogged with algae. OPRD hired Interfluve Engineering of Hood River to conduct modeling for the design work. So far the modeling says the bypass channel design will help keep water temperatures down, he said.

Francis Preston told the court she saw a helicopter drawing water from the pond recently to fight a nearby forest fire. She emphasized the importance of having water sources like Bates Pond and Olive Lake for firefighting purposes.

Dennis Bradley, the regional OPRD manager, said Bates State Park was seeing more visitors.

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