

Grant County, Forest Service nearing forest patrol contract

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

The Grant County Sheriff’s Office and the Forest Service are close to inking a five-year contract to provide the county with a \$16,000 increase in pay for part-time forest patrol.

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer said he has been communicating with Craig Trulock, Malheur National Forest supervisor.

He said he had been keeping Trulock apprised of what his office is seeing and doing when on patrol in the forest.

Palmer said it “sounds promising” that funding could come from “adjacent forests” beyond Malheur.

Trulock said Friday the Forest Service is putting together a five-year contract that will provide the county with \$20,000 per year to pay for forest patrol.

Trulock said the Forest Service would meet with the sheriff’s office annually to assess the staffing situation and add more funds to the agreement on an as-needed basis.

He said the contract is “not

just a one-shot of money.”

Trulock said the Forest Service is getting the agreement in right at the end of its fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30.

He said Forest Service Law Enforcement gets separate funding that could add to the agreement, but he said he does not know how much they have this late into the fiscal year.

He said both the Forest Service and Forest Service Law Enforcement could add money to the contract in the next fiscal year.

County Commissioner Jim Hamsher said the Forest Service currently provides \$6,000 to pay for a forest patrol deputy.

County Treasurer Julie Ellison said the fund she uses to pay for the forest patrol position has been over budget every year because the contract that pays for the forest patrol deputy does not immediately pay out.

She said the position was supposed to be for a part-time, non-union reserve deputy, but the sheriff’s office has Deputy Dave Dobler patrolling the forest.



Eagle file photo
Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer meets with a citizen in front of the Sheriff’s Office in May. Palmer said his communication with Malheur National Forest Supervisor Craig Trulock, who stepped into the position last year, has been mutually beneficial and they are nearing a new forest patrol contract.

Ellison said that Dobler puts in 30 hours a week and, with benefits, earns roughly \$50 per hour. She said he is one of the most expensive deputies within the sheriff’s office.

The part-time position was budgeted at \$14 per hour with no benefits.

In the past, she said, deputies performed forest patrols as they passed through the area.

“In years past, it was supposed to be someone at a pretty low rate for that person to go out into the forest and patrol occasionally,” she said. “Now they have put Dobler, who is the highest-paid deputy with the highest PERS rate and a pretty good insurance rate.”

Hamsher said he had conversations with Trulock about renewing the contract that

would have the Forest Service provide the county \$35,000 to pay for forest patrol.

Hamsher said he would like to get a flat-rate amount that would cover the hourly rate. Then, he said, the county could invoice the Forest Service at the end of the month.

“With \$6,000 they don’t get much patrolling done,” he said.

The county signed the contract in 2018. It is similar to others used in other Oregon counties.

In the past, the county had agreements with the Forest Service to patrol campgrounds on national forest lands during busy weekends, but there was no agreement in place from 2011 until the Rainbow Gathering in 2017.

“Our staffing will most likely stay the same,” Palmer said. “And it will be assigned to the part-time forest patrol deputy with possible extra coverage by full-time deputies to work the national forest areas when the need arises.”

Palmer said there is potential to bring in reserve deputies, such as when they are short-staffed on fires on rare occasions.

He said those may also go into a separate contract that would be billed to the fire instead of the patrol contract.

“And realistically, depending on the total amount,” he said, “we may seek authorization for our commissioners to move the position to full time rather than 30 hours a week.”

Palmer said it is something the county needs to consider because the workload has been heavy on the forest patrol.

“I believe we can justify a full-time employee,” he said. “It’s only if we can afford it.”

Trulock said the information sharing and coordination between the Forest Service and the sheriff’s office allows for more public safety.

“It’s a great tool,” he said. “It provides an opportunity to build relationships with the sheriff’s office. We only have one law enforcement officer for 1.7 million acres, so this is a great way for them to work together.”



Eagle file photo
Visitors look over a single-engine air tanker at the Grant County Regional Airport.

ODF plans phase two of night SEAT operation evaluations

Blue Mountain Eagle

Oregon Department of Forestry began phase two of evaluation of night single-engine air tanker (SEAT) operations July 15.

Phase two builds on the training and lessons learned during phase one, which occurred in Grant County in July 2019. ODF’s Aviation Unit has been working with the contractor to develop safety guidelines and procedures for target and firefighter identification for night operations on ODF protected lands. Firefighters from the John Day Unit will again coordinate in the training and evaluation of the operation. There will be increased night traffic at the airport during the week of July 20 as part of the SEAT evaluation activity.

During phase one, the SEAT dropped water on simulated fire “targets” directed by firefighters on the ground. The SEAT pilot uses night vision goggles to identify the target and all ground resources including fire engines and personnel. Firefighters use verbal cues and hand signals utilizing chem sticks to direct the pilot to target location.

During phase two, firefighters from the John Day Unit received training focused on safety of the pilot, firefighters, observers and ensuring effective application of the SEAT “drop” as well as operation of

the SEAT base, located at the Grant County Airport.

SEAT planes are capable of dropping 700 gallons of water, fire retardant or fire suppressing gel. These drops are intended to slow the spread of the fire and allow firefighters and equipment to build fireline to control and contain the fire. Water will be used during the initial evaluation activities.

Following initial training of ground personnel last week, evaluation of night SEAT proficiency began July 21. The operation will be evaluated based on safety procedures, effectiveness of the “drops” and proper communication. ODF’s Partenavia aircraft, equipped with a camera and night vision systems, will be used to record and provide over watch of the operation. The aircraft is equipped with thermal imaging infrared cameras for use in fire detection, along with coordinated mapping capabilities.

Upon completion of the night SEAT drop exercises and final evaluation by ODF’s Aviation Unit, the plan is for staffing a SEAT at night in anticipation of a lighting event where night operations can be used in actual fire suppression on ODF protected lands. ODF currently contracts five single-engine air tankers as part of the suppression resources throughout Oregon.

Khakis, camera, Vans and Davis Creek Park

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Chill, subtle winds blew on July 8 in John Day with a cerulean sky accompanied by socially distanced clouds. The time arrived to explore the recently finished Davis Creek Park that provided a trail system embellished with trees and multiple paths for spectators of all kind.

While driving up Bridge Street in a Black 2007 Honda Civic that efficiently stored heat, unbearably so in the summer, the journey of the day began at the top of Northwest Valley View Drive.

At the entrance of the trail system, a map detailed four paths and their lengths with three paths branching off from Creekside.

The quarter-mile Creekside path connects with all the other paths and is the main route that leads travelers from Valley View Drive down to end of the trail at Northwest Seventh Avenue.

Walkers or bikers can keep the trip simple and travel directly up and down this route, but there are three other paths labeled Creekside Connector, Overlook and North Trail for people to explore as well.

As the trip began, the trail was established by rocks on the left and right with gravel in between to walk on.

Plenty of trees occupied by birds, primarily crows that persistently crowed, filled the path with enough shade to take a moment to either embrace the sun or retreat and cool down.

The descent down at the beginning of the trail was gradual and nothing extreme, perfect for casual walking, especially for an individual in Vans, khakis and a buttoned-up shirt.

Within the first couple of minutes, there was an option to take a left and continue on the Creekside path or go straight and cross the tiny bridge over to the Creekside Connector. The 200-foot connector provides a path between Creekside Trail and the Overlook.

Each crossroad is also



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz
Toward the end of the North Trail at Davis Creek Park in John day, a butterfly rested and allowed for a photo opportunity.



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz
Indicators are located throughout the Davis Creek Park trail system so travelers don’t have to worry about getting lost.

accompanied by small signs with arrows and the name of a path so travelers will always be aware of their location when exploring Davis Creek Park.

I walked over the short bridge, accompanied by the audible flow of the creek, and embarked for the Overlook with potential views awaiting this traveler armed with a camera.

After crossing the bridge, the connector path began to gradually rise but at a pace that was easy to adjust to. While walking up, the sounds of the irksome crows

continued, along with crying dogs in the distance.

Walking up the stairs to the Overlook Trail was easy and began to provide glimpses of the potential view that awaits at the top of the 725-foot trail. After ascending the steps and an additional 7 minutes of walking, accompanied by taking photos left and right, I reached the viewpoint.

It provided an overview of John Day to the left with many buildings and businesses accompanied by trees. The right side of the scene provided a view into the open range leading to Mt. Vernon.

The viewpoint was fairly quiet, probably because the crows kept their distance, as the cars traveling on Main

Street were faintly heard, accompanied by the sound of the river flowing near Riverside Trailer Park.

After soaking in the calm, worry-free, current event-free moment, it was time to head back to where the Overlook Trail connected with the Creekside Trail.

Back on Creekside Trail, it was time to travel down to the North Trail. While the North Trail, which is about a quarter mile, was not as scenic as the viewpoint, it did provide a closer look into what was viewed from on top.

The North Trail was leveled after descending to it from Creek Trail and was easy to walk through. The North Trail is a straight path for the majority of the walk, but does have its moments for great photo opportunities. Reaching the end of North Point signaled the end of the trip and the start of walking back up to Valley View Drive.

The trip took about an hour to finish by slowly walking and taking numerous pictures, and was simple to complete in Vans.

I reflected on the trip while letting the heat in the black Honda Civic air out from being in the sun: Davis Creek Trail is not the biggest or most rigorous trail in the county, but its simplicity, options and views provide an easy and quick trip that anybody can enjoy during the taxing time of COVID-19.

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