

# Project

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be this year's Black Butte Fire on the Malheur.

Firefighters were able to battle the blaze in the eastern part of the forest and catch it at 23,000 acres, he said, in large part because crews had previously treated areas around the Wild and Scenic Malheur River corridor. Had that part of the forest been untreated and overgrown with fuels, the fire could have been 10 times as big, Trulock said.

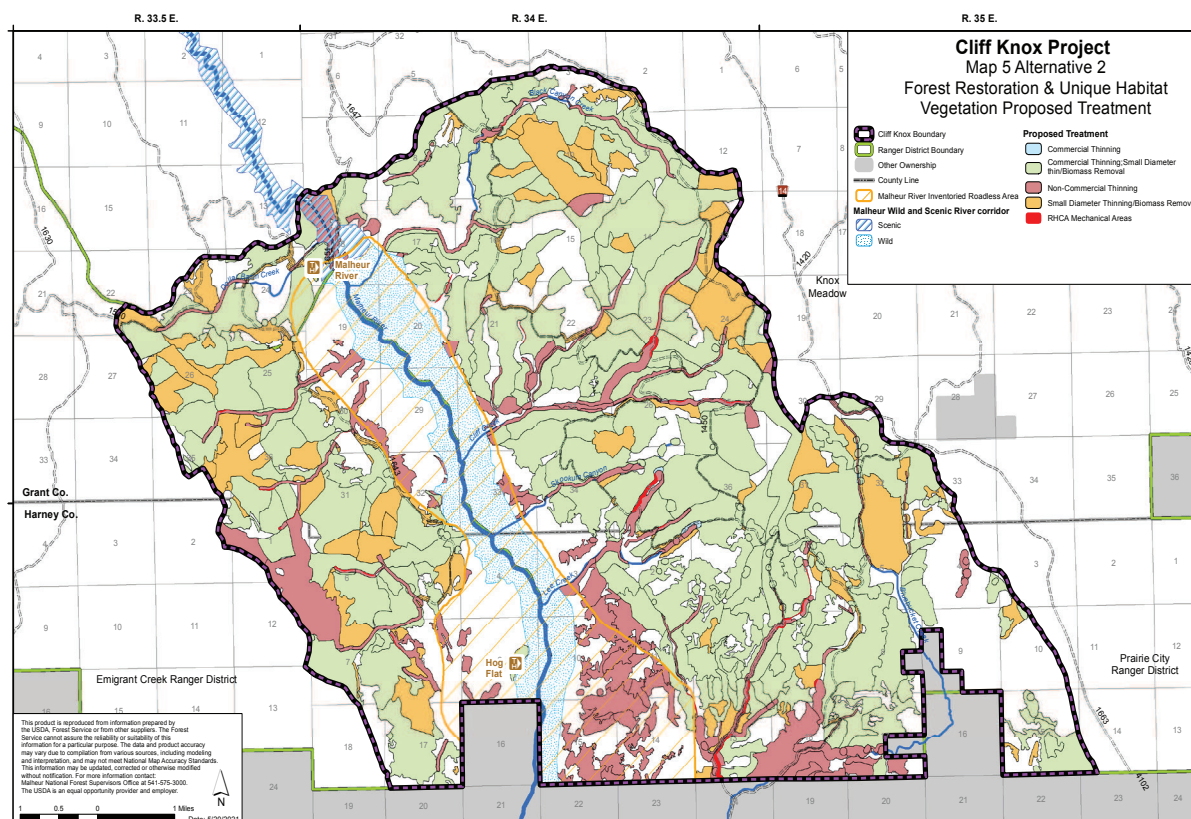
Cueno told the Grant County Court that the project area is dense with diseased, thick and dry trees and other fuels, making the area extremely vulnerable to wildfires.

The Cliff Knox Project, according to Cueno, will use the Eastside Screens amendment to the Forest Service's regional management plan. Up until this year, the Eastside Screens prohibited the cutting of trees more than 21 inches in diameter in several Eastern Oregon national forests.

Under the new amendment, the recruitment of old and large trees is emphasized. Trees older than 150 years are prioritized for protection. In areas that don't have a sufficient number of old trees, the priority shifts to large trees, defined as at least 30 inches in diameter for grand fir and white fir and at least 21 inches for any other species.

The Forest Service made the change to the rule in the name of wildfire preparedness. Shane Jeffries, Ochoco National Forest supervisor, told the Eagle in January that the 21-inch rule made it difficult to remove fire-prone species like grand and white fir without a lengthy regulatory process. He said the idea is to create landscapes that can better withstand dry conditions and recover more quickly after wildfires and other disturbances.

Cueno said loggers can cut trees up to 30 inches. In respect to the Cliff Knox Project, Cueno said, the Eastside Screens amendment will



Alternative No. 2, shown here, is the Malheur National Forest's proposed action.

not change much of what the forest service would be doing on the landscape.

### Concerns about prescribed burns

Some people have pushed back against the project, saying the use of prescribed burns across the landscape would be counterintuitive to the idea of protecting the forest.

At the Sept. 22 Grant County Court session, county resident Marcia Christenson said using fires to remove fuels chars the landscape, ruins trees by inviting disease-spreading insects and lowers air quality in the region.

Prairie City District Ranger Ed Munoz, who retired two days after the meeting, said the lack of moderate- to low-intensity fire, which land managers try to reproduce in prescribed burns, is what is causing much of the current forest health issues.

He said the Forest Service has been suppressing fire for more than a century, resulting in overgrown forests.

The concept behind the Cliff Knox Project is to mechanically thin the forest initially to open up tree stands, then come back into the woods with prescribed burns to re-establish a regular fire interval in what were formerly fire-adapted forests.

Christenson asked Munoz to explain the burnt trees on the Middle Fork of the John Day River.

Munoz said he could not speak to that area because it was not his district and he had not seen those trees. He said he did not want to dismiss her concerns, but he told Christenson that 2- to 4-foot scorch heights were considered acceptable in prescribed burns. Regular use of prescribed burns, he said, produces a diversity of forage on the forest floor.

"We need that fire," Munoz said. "It's a cleansing and a healthy por-

tion of the ecosystems, and we as humans don't have that relationship with fire that the wildlife and the forest does."

"It is not without risk," Trulock said. "Fire will happen one way or another, and it's better if we can have it on our terms, when we want — you know, when the time is right and when we will have the best outcome."

### Alternative 3 and elk security

Alternatives 2 and 3 both include inventoried roadless areas. Under a 2001 rule, 58 million acres of National Forest lands without existing roads were placed under a designation that generally discourages road building.

Alternative 3 would close 37 miles of roads with the intention of improving conditions for elk on public land, according to Cueno. She noted the road closures are not in the Malheur National Forest's proposed

action at this point.

She said Alternative 3 was included for consideration because of comments that the agency received during the scoping period of the project. She said there were groups that wanted to see the Forest Service create additional elk security in the area.

Trulock told the Eagle last week that the idea is to create an area where the animals are not disturbed and keep them off private land. He said when the elk wander onto private property, they can cause problems that range from broken fences and loss of livestock forage to the spread of disease to cattle.

The issue has impacted local landowners. The Grant County Farm Bureau reported in a September press release that this year's historic drought compounded the elk issue as grass levels dwindled due to rain shortages. The Farm Bureau called on the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to open up its hunting program on private land in the county.

### What happens next?

As forest supervisor, Trulock said, he will make the decision on which alternative the project will use after reviewing recommendations from an interdisciplinary team. He anticipates a split of opinion among different groups. For example, the timber industry likely would prefer a version which serves their interests, while environmental groups will back the alternatives that line up with their members' values. He said elements of the different alternatives can be mixed and matched.

The next step will be to put out a draft decision, Trulock said. At that point, an objection period will be opened, and anybody who has provided comments on the project can file an objection before a final decision is made.

"And then we negotiate," Trulock said. "And we can either negotiate individually, or we can have open negotiations where multiple parties are in the room and we try to find a solution."

# Paving

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Some councilors called for a four-way stop, but there were also some concerns about requiring uphill traffic to come to a complete halt in icy conditions.

"My thinking on a four-way stop is it's going to be hard for people to get restarted on Bridge Street when they're coming up the hill," Councilor David Holland said. "I think a three-way stop is very necessary."

Rookstool and others suggested bringing in radar-equipped

electronic signs that would tell motorists how fast they're going and flash in warning when drivers exceed the speed limit.

"I would be happy to get the flashing signs because I do think they're effective," Green said.

By the end of the meeting, a

consensus had developed around the idea of putting in a three-way stop at the intersection and bringing in one or two flashing radar speed signs.

Green told the Eagle later it appeared that the project could open to through traffic sometime this week, possibly on

Wednesday, Oct. 6.

Work on the project began in July, with Tidewater Contractors LLC as the primary contractor.

The total cost of the project was approximately \$270,000, Green said, with \$100,000 in grant funding provided by the Oregon Department of Transportation.



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