

Eagle file photo

Federal funding for restoration projects on the Malheur National Forest is intended to encourage ecological and economic sustainability and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

Forest

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jobs in the woods and generating a steady and predictable timber supply to feed area lumber mills.

Backed by the two collaborators, the Southern Blues Restoration Coalition has been supported by CFLRP money since 2012. The coalition was initially awarded \$2.5 million per year and received a bump to \$4 million per year in 2016.

According to the coalition's application for a federal funding extension, it currently oversees nearly 900,000 acres on the Malheur and proposes to treat an additional 210,000 acres.

A record of success

The Southern Blues Restoration Coalition's work has received praise at the national level, but its most dramatic success story might be Malheur Lumber, Grant County's lone sawmill and largest private employer.

In 2012, the same year Southern Blues was formed, Malheur Lumber announced plans to close down, citing an inconsistent and

unreliable timber supply. But the coalition was able to help broker a deal that kept the mill running.

Working with the coalition, the Forest Service was able to accelerate timber sales and increase the pace of restoration work on the Malheur by entering into a 10-year stewardship contract with Iron Triangle, a John Day-based logging company.

Stewardship contracts typically involve a mix of timber sales and restoration work while supporting local jobs in the timber industry.

According to the coalition's funding application, the long-term contract with Iron Triangle has enabled the logging company to add approximately 50 employees while creating a predictable supply of restoration byproducts to Malheur Lumber, thus allowing the mill to keep its doors open.

Different funding streams

Forest Service program manager Roy Walker points out that stewardship contracting and CFLRP are two different funding mechanisms.

He also said that stewardship contracts are fundamentally different from traditional timber sales

contracts.

The Forest Service awards timber contracts by identifying an area with commercially marketable trees, marking the boundaries of the proposed timber sale and estimating the amount of merchantable wood in the sale area, Walker said. Then the agency evaluates the fair market value of the timber and opens up a bidding process to companies that can meet bonding and other requirements.

According to Walker, the Forest Service can also award service contracts for projects that do not include removing marketable timber. He said this could consist of pre-commercial thinning, trail maintenance or stream restoration.

As the Forest Service expanded its forest restoration, fuels reduction and thinning activities, Walker said, it melded forest management work, which often lacks commercial value, with timber sales.

Stewardship brings the two together, allowing the Forest Service to award the commercial value that loggers would ordinarily bid on to finance restoration work on national forest land.

Webb said roughly 70 or 80% of the commercial timber har-

vested each year on the Malheur National Forest is through the 10-year stewardship contract.

Another 30%, Webb said, comes from traditional timber sales or other contract mechanisms that anyone can bid on.

In a traditional timber sale, Webb noted, the highest bidder gets the timber, logs it and pays the Forest Service, which then hands the money to Washington, D.C. One benefit of a stewardship contract, he said, is that the money stays in the county.

What's next?

The Iron Triangle contract expires in 2023, and it's not clear at this point what will happen then.

Trulock said he'll be discussing that topic next month at the November meeting of Blue Mountains Forest Partners. While long-term stewardship contracts have certain advantages, he pointed out, there are lots of other approaches that can work as well.

His talk to the Blue Mountains collaborative, Trulock said, will focus on the "suite of tools in the toolkit."

Park

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Long-term plans also include excavating a portion of the riverbank to allow easy access to the water.

"Our hope is to open that riverfront, do a terraced approach so you can sit on the riverfront and kids can play where it's safe," Green said.

The Hill Family Park won't officially open to the public until restrooms are constructed and grass is seeded next spring, he added, but the bridge should be ready for public use by Thanksgiving.

That's significant, Green said, because the span provides an important point of connection in the city's burgeoning trail network.

"It's a key linkage," Green said. "It ties together the trails and neighborhoods along the south side and the north side (of the river)."

A new stretch of trail starting from the north side of the bridge will connect the Hill Park trails to the existing paved trail at the Seventh Street Sports Complex to the east, with a planned future trail link from there to the Grant County Fairgrounds. Work is also underway on a new trail running west from the bridge that will tie into the unpaved trail system at Davis Creek Park and continue along the river's north bank to the John Day Innovation Gateway site and Patterson Bridge Road.

At full buildout, the system is expected to encompass about 5 miles of all-weather trails, including about 1 mile of paved pathways.

The city purchased the land for the new park — along with a 7-acre parcel that would become Davis Creek Park — from the Hill family in 2018 for a total of \$115,000.

Since then, \$472,000 in state grants have been awarded to support park improvements, Green said, and the city is awaiting word on an additional \$150,000 in state funding.

That grant would allow the city to finish surfacing the paved portion of the trail system, essentially completing the network of multiuse paths.

"If we get this next piece, the \$150,000, we'll pretty much be done," Green said.

"Were that to happen, I think we could have the trail system completed by the end of next summer."

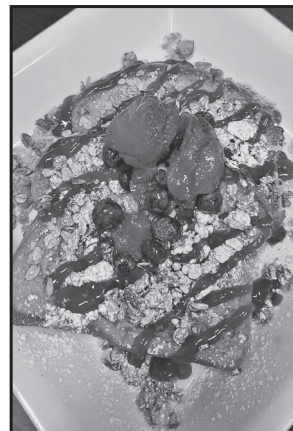
Major contractors on the Hill Family Park project include Iron Triangle, Sisul Engineering, Tyler Sheedy Construction and Mike Springer of Benchmark Land Surveying.

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Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

A stagecoach on display inside the Dayville Merc.

Mercantile

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personally because he and his father both live on the property.

Knapp said his family lost their home east of Eugene during the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire, which ranked among the largest wildfires in Oregon's history.

"That was the point (after the Holiday fire) that I decided

that we were going to fight for what was ours," Knapp said. "The Merc is our home."

Knapp said it is important to note that the Graves family — specifically Jay Graves, who Knapp referred to as the family patriarch — worked with him in the beginning. But when they decided not to renew the interest-only payment plan, Knapp said, they left him with no other choice but to file for Chapter 13 bankruptcy.

Chapter 13 bankruptcy, which is referred to as a "wage earner's plan," allows people with regular income to develop a plan to repay all or part of their debts. Under this chapter of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code, debtors propose a payment plan to make installments to creditors over three to five years.

Knapp said he had signed a five-year plan with the state, protecting his assets and businesses, including the Merc.



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