Lemon Gulch plan scaled back

By MICHAEL KOHN The Bulletin

PRINEVILLE — A plan to construct biking trails in a remote area of the Ochoco National Forest east of Prineville has been scaled back by the U.S. Forest Service following a lengthy dialogue with bikers, equestrians and other stakeholders who have been watching the evolution of the project.

Details of the new plans were laid out in a draft environmental assessment for the Lemon Gulch Trails Project, which is now available for public review, according to a news release on Thursday from the Forest Service.

Plans to develop the new biking trails have ignited spirited debate in Prineville and the mountain biking community of Central Oregon. Some believe the project will help ease tensions on existing trails shared by bikers and equestrians. Others say building the trails will damage sensitive habitat for deer, elk, eagles, cougar and other

Still more worry that the project will attract hordes of mountain biking enthusiasts to Prineville, altering the city's rural character in the same way that outdoor sports transformed Bend's logging town image. The project is a frequent talking point on the Facebook group "Don't Bend Prineville."

The network of bike trails is planned for the west side of the Lookout Mountain Ranger District, about 20 miles northeast of Prineville.

The draft environmental assessment compares five options, including a "no action" alternative.

One alternative has just 19 miles of trail built in the area. Another would see 51.6 miles of new bike trails.



Mark Morical/Bulletin, File

A pristine singletrack trail climbs up Lookout Mountain, as seen in 2015.

The Forest Service prefers the 27.5-mile alternative, which includes 9.8 miles of beginner trails, 11.2 miles of intermediate trails, and 13.9 miles of advanced trails.

"It provides a much smaller footprint than the original proposal based on key issues raised in earlier phases of the project, as well as individual and group meetings with permittees, community members, and elected officials," according to the release.

The Forest Service notes that the 27.5-mile alternative also "reduces trail density in some areas specifically to address wildlife and grazing concerns, while still maintaining a complete mix of trail opportunity.'

Slater Turner, Lookout Mountain district ranger, said the draft environmental assessment was developed over a one-year period and included input from Crook County community leaders, grazing permittees, and tribal members of the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, as well as other stakeholders and interested parties.

"We have taken great care in incorporating a wide variety of comments and look forward to hearing feedback on these alternatives," said Turner.

A scoping document released in March 2021 laid out original plans for the project, as part of a larger proposal by trail users interested in expanding trail access in the Ochoco National

The draft environmental assessment is a refined version of the scoping document after widespread public feedback showed cracks in the community over the plan. The criticisms are widespread, ranging from concerns over wildlife habitat to the perceived influx of outside mountain bike groups. Even the name of the project has sparked controversy — critics insist the area be called Lemon Creek, not Lemon Gulch.

In September, opponents organized a protest in front of the Crook County Courthouse in Prineville, urging the Forest Service to rethink the plans and choose another location.

Dave Nielsen, an opponent of the project, said reducing the size of the complex from 51.6 miles of trail to 27.5 will not make much difference and the area will still experience negative impacts caused by development.

"Just as many riders and followers will visit the complex to ride, even if the complex is half of that in the original proposal," said Nielsen, who advocates for the "no action" alternative.

If the plan is adopted, the use of mountain bikes would be banned from Dec. 1 to May 1 for deer and elk winter range protection. The project also includes plans for three parking lots located at different elevations to facilitate shuttling. Kiosks and vault toilets are also planned.

The Forest Service describes the level of development as "low level" to maintain a "rustic character."

While the single-track trails would be designed for mountain bike use, they would also be available for hikers and trail runners. Some trails would be designed for adaptive mountain biking equipment. Equestrian use would be discouraged and dogs would not be allowed on the trails before July 1.

Kim McCarrel, an avid horseback rider who frequently rides trails in Crook County, said she applauds the Forest Service's efforts to create purpose-built bike trails that "provide the kinds of experiences many mountain bike riders want."

McCarrel said equestrians will appreciate the effort to redistribute mountain bike use away from Lookout Mountain and Round Mountain trails, two areas popular with horseback riders. Conflicts between bikes and horseback riders arise frequently on both trails, she said.

"These trails became popular for

mountain biking (recently) because they had nowhere else to ride," said McCarrel. "The steep slopes and short sight lines create ideal conditions for a downhill mountain bike to inadvertently spook a horse and endanger its rider."

Travis Holman, a mountain biker and vice president of the Central Oregon Trail Alliance, said the 51.6-mile alternative "would do the most to give mountain bikers the best riding experience and therefore presents the best chance to reduce crowding and conflict on other trails."

But he also acknowledged that the preferred alternative "represents the best compromise of those presented in

"We are very heartened to see that impacts to natural and cultural resources can be minimized while still providing a valuable outdoor recreation experience," Holman said.

"As mountain bikers, we want everyone to have the opportunity to enjoy healthy recreation on our shared public lands while minimizing impacts on natural and cultural resources, and we're happy to see that this can be accomplished at Lemon Gulch," Holman adds.

A phased construction is planned if the project moves forward, with an initial set of trails installed followed by one or two years of monitoring before the building of additional trails.

Trail maintenance would be conducted with help from local trail user groups, including Ochoco trails and Central Oregon Trail Alliance.

Public comments will be accepted on the project through Dec. 19. Those wishing to comment may do so electronically on the U.S. Forest Service website (fs.usda.gov/ project/?project=58831).

Moving

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make that work for her," Griffin added. "I don't know if it was a miscommunication or misunderstanding or what, but she decided that she needed to be in there a lot sooner than we were quite ready to be out."

This dynamic prompted Painted Sky to ask the Madden family, which owns the building they plan to purchase, if they could rent the facility until the purchase takes place. "Luckily, the Maddens were very gracious and very accommodating, and have really, really helped make things work for us to move sooner," Griffin said.

The Maddens have moved their real estate office to a new location at 237 S. Canyon Blvd. in John Day in order to make room for the rushed relocation by Painted Sky.

Griffin added that the arts center is not fully operational at this time but is trying to be a good community partner, even if it feels like it has been pushed out of its old location.

There is excitement about the new location, however. Griffin said the new site will allow the center to expand current programs and support new ones in addition to having the ability to serve a population it wasn't able to accommodate at the Canyon City site.

"That is definitely such an added bonus — the location is fantastic," she said. "It's super-convenient; it's right where everything is. I feel like we'll be able to meet the needs of other demographics that we couldn't quite reach out in Canyon City just due to transportation issues and that kind of thing.

Some of the space in the Bridge Street building is cur-

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rently occupied by renters, including the Grant County office of the Oregon State University Extension Service. Griffin said the arts center would honor any rental agreements with parties occupying the building once the purchase is finalized.

"At that point, we would be landlords as well," she said. "So, you know, that does create income, which is great. And we would honor all of those leases."

As some of those leases expire over time, Griffin added, Painted Sky would expand to fill the space.

In the short term, Painted Sky will continue to offer some programs at the 118 Washington St. location in Canyon City. Youth who attend Painted Sky's after-school programs will begin those activities at the new location after Christmas break. Students who currently ride the bus from Humbolt Elementary to Painted Sky will need to take the orange bus after Christmas break in order to be dropped off at the arts center's new location.

Griffin wanted to make sure that the public is aware that ceramics, leatherworking and painting classes are all operating at the new facility. Youth programs will follow after the first of the year.

Painted Sky Center for the Arts will assume ownership of the entire building at 116 NW Bridge St. after the sale goes through. Painted Sky is looking at a June timeline for grant funds to be awarded so it can finalize the purchase.

Duncan, meanwhile, said she is eyeing a reopening of the Squeeze-In at the Canyon City location just before Christmas if things fall into place and the contractors can complete their work in time.

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S. John Collins / Baker City Herald, File Elk gather during a previous winter at the feeding site near Old Auburn Road, southwest of Baker City.

Feeding sites are ready for elk

By JAYSON JACOBY Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — The feast for elk was laid on in time for Thanksgiving, but the elk pay no heed to holidays.

They know when December begins,

At least the elk that Dan Marvin deals with recognize the arrival of the last month of the year.

Marvin manages the Elkhorn Wildlife Area. It's a series of 10 winter elk-feeding stations, ranging from Old Auburn Lane southwest of Baker City to Shaw Mountain in Union County, operated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

ODFW started the wildlife area in 1971. Its purpose isn't what it might seem to be, though.

The state agency started setting out alfalfa hay for elk not to stave off starvation during the long Northeastern Oregon winters.

Elk, as a general rule, can withstand all but the worst winters.

ODFW's goal was to prevent the animals from gobbling the hay that ranchers put up to feed their cattle.

The challenge is that unlike some parts of the state, there is little of what amounts to a buffer zone of winter range, a place between the mountains and the valleys where elk can congregate and get enough to eat without plundering ranches.

ODFW in effect created that zone with the feeding sites.

The idea, which has been largely effective over the past half century, is to entice the elk with alfalfa while they're migrating from their summer range in the

Once the elk become accustomed to getting an easy meal, they tend to return to the same spots every year.

Some elk still bypass the feeding sites at times, but they take a much smaller toll than they otherwise would.

Marvin's hay ledger proves the point. Each year he lays in a supply of about 1,100 tons — the capacity of the barns at the feeding sites.

We like to start winter with full barns," said Marvin, who is starting his fifth winter as the Elkhorn Wildlife Area

ODFW buys that hay from local ranchers.

"We have some established vendors in the valley we work with," Marvin said. "We pay market price."

The feed sites are closed to the public from Dec. 1 through April 10.

Because there are elk hunting seasons going on through November (and even later, in some places), elk tend to be moving around a lot until Dec. 1, Marvin said.

But once that day arrives, and the hunting pressure eases, the elk are all but certain to start strolling into the feed sites, where the hay will be ready.

"They know the time frame," he said. In years when snow comes early -2020 was an example, with a couple feet of snow accumulating in the mountains the first half of November — elk will wander into some of the feed sites before

This year, though, with heavy snow in

late October and early November but almost none since, Marvin said the elk have stayed away.

The elk that congregate at the Anthony Creek feed site, near the wildlife area headquarters west of North Powder, tend to be the most consistent when it comes to the Dec. 1 arrival, Marvin said.

Elk that migrate to the other feeding sites, by contrast, often don't show up in large numbers until snow begins to pile

During mid-winter, the Wildlife Area crew feeds more than 1,000 elk, including about 500 at the Old Auburn Lane site and 250 or so at Anthony Creek.

A few of the feed sites also attract deer. The Auburn and Anthony Creek sites are the two publicly accessible properties with maintained roads where people can park and watch the big herds of elk, which usually include multiple mature, branch-antlered bulls.

To get to the Auburn site, drive south of Baker City on Highway 7 for about seven miles, and turn right on Old Auburn Lane. Follow this gravel road (maintained in winter) for about 3.5 miles where a sign marks the Wildlife Area. The elk are fed on a knoll south of the road.

In 2021 the wildlife area crew pruned many of the ponderosa pine trees near the road, improving the view to the feeding site, Marvin said.

To reach the Anthony Creek site, from North Powder drive west on River Lane for about 8.5 miles. The elk are fed in a meadow south of the road. You can also reach River Lane via Haines and the Anthony Lakes Highway.

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