

Minutes

Crook County Natural Resources Committee

March 13, 2024

Committee Members Present: Bill McCormack, Frank Porfily, Mike Lunn, Kim Vogel, Steve McGuire, Lynne Breese, Cliff Kiser, Melinda Kestler, Andy Gallagher, Calista Songstad, Tim Deboodt

Members Absent: Casey Kaiser

Guests Present: Kyle Hensley (BLM), Shane Jeffries (FS), Ernest Linden (BLM)

Public Present: Jenna Deibel, Nettie Downing, Shelley Santucci, John Breese, Jodie Barram, Dave Neilsen, Sharron Neilsen, Wendy Woodley, Don Vogel, Mike Ervin

Meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Chair Steve McGuire @ COCC Crook County Open Campus

Pledge of Allegiance

Minutes: Cliff Kiser moved to approve the minutes of the February 14, 2024 meeting as amended. Lynne Breese seconded. Motion passed.

Agency Update:

Shane Jeffries (FS) shared that the Crooked River National Grasslands has received some interest in solar development. While no locations have been identified, very early conversations to gauge interest have started. In order for any renewable project to move forward, there are several processes that the application would have to go through. Cliff Kiser asked if the FS was under the same guidance on renewable energy development as the BLM. Shane responded that he has seen nothing yet from USDA, but that since it is a part of the Executive Branch, the guidance would be similar.

John Breese asked about the Wildfire Crisis Strategy and why the Deschutes National Forest was selected but not the Ochoco's. Shane responded that when the original landscapes were selected, places that had a lot of urban/wildland interface and infrastructure rose to the top. 21 National Forests Nationwide were looked at and Oregon had 2 in the top 11. Shane said that while the Ochoco is not a part of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, fire issues are driving workload on the Ochoco's over the next 5 – 10 years.

Shane announce that that the Mill Creek Vegetation Management Plan will have a draft decision available for public review within the next week or two. The release of the draft will start an objection period. There is an effort on the part of the FS to coordinate work with adjoining private lands.

The North Fork Crooked River Vegetation Management Plan draft decision should be out this coming fall (2024). Both of these plans have been recently modified to reflect the recent policy changes nationwide in old growth, east-side screen litigation and work within riparian habitat corridors. Kim asked why the FS was opposed to doing Forest Plan Amendments. Shane responded that court decisions have said that

repetitive amendments are not allowed, thus nothing to do until the Forest Plan goes through a formal process of updating.

Shane spoke about the rapid tree mortality being observed on the Ochocos and other forests. The Ochoco NF appears to be the epicenter. An ID team has been pulled together to look at locations of tree mortality and to begin to access possible treatments. Areas of emphasis are campgrounds, infrastructure that could be at risk and areas where vegetation management is already under way.

The FS continues to work with the City of Prineville on its Biomass Project. The FS is helping the City make connections with the Regional Office but hopes that the State of Oregon will get on board soon.

Construction of the FS Rappel tower training project at the Prineville Airport should get underway soon. A remodel and new construction project at the LaMonta Compound is now able to move forward since a budget has been approved and money appropriated by Congress.

Frank asked about the Wild Horse litigation. Shane said it was still in the Courts. The Adoption Center being planned for on the Grasslands is still moving forward with a plat approval and 30 % design work done so far. The FS is planning on using a design/build construction process for this project.

State Parks no update

Kyle Hensley (BLM) shared that the office had been holding meet and greet meetings with permittees and the mostly new grazing staff of the BLM. Kyle mentioned that there had been a lot of public comments for the grazing permit renewals of Camp Creek and Saber Ridge. BLM is now reviewing those comments before renewing the grazing permits.

Kyle shared that housing continues to be the biggest issue in hiring for seasonal/temporary positions. BLM is recently rented several houses/apartments in Prineville, trying to provide housing for 8 – 10 people.

Updates on local Solar applications on lands administered by BLM: 5 projects have been identified within Crook County, none of these projects are currently being moved forward by BLM. There is 1 project in Deschutes County between Redmond and Bend and it is moving forward through the process (EIS). This project is initially covering 4000 acres and the application was made 2 years ago, prior to the initiation of the PEIS. There is also a project being proposed near LaPine.

Agenda Item: Programmatic EIS BLM Solar

During the February meeting of the Crook County NRAC, it was decided to take some time to discuss whether or not the Committee would recommend to the County, a draft response to the Draft EIS related to the Programmatic Solar EIS (BLM) covering the western US. Cliff Kiser provided an overview of his reading of the draft document. There are 5 alternatives being reviewed, from do nothing (status quo) to severely limiting where solar developments could be located including restricting them to within 15 miles of existing transmission lines and on sites that have already been disturbed. Cliff expressed concern that the local projects mentioned today, would be moving forward prior to the completion of this PEIS. Mike Lunn wondered if the PEIS looked at the different types of solar developments and Kyle responded that it did not. It was noted that only 1 public meeting was held on the draft EIS within the 5 western states being added (Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and Montana) and it was held in Boise, ID.

During Committee discussion, Mike Lunn expressed concern about a detailed review by the County. The PEIS is such a broad scoping document that specific projects as proposed will still have to have site-specific NEPA completed on them, and it is at this level that the County's comments would be most impactful. Kim Vogel wondered if there was a requirement for those proposing solar projects to first exhaust all private land options before being able to construct a large scale project on public lands. Melinda asked if the PEIS mention the process of local government review, for those Counties with Natural Resource Plans and local Coordination.

Discussion was also held on what might be meant by "only on lands already disturbed". Some might argue that all grazing lands are already disturbed because of grazing. The group was seeking more clarification on the definition of "disturbed".

Mike Lunn suggested that there needs to be some serious thinking about legacy of public lands and open spaces as this conversation moves forward. Chair Steve McGuire appointed a sub-committee to review the document and prepare a draft letter for review at the April meeting of the Committee for possible recommendation to the County for submittal. Steve appointed Cliff Kiser as chair of this committee. Lynne Breese, Melinda Kestler, Kim Vogel and Mike Lunn will also serve on the Committee.

FS amendment to add Indaziflam to its list of approved herbicides for annual grass control on the Crooked River National Grasslands. Tim reviewed the FS scoping letter and the letter being submitted to the FS by the Crooked River Weed Management Area in support of this amendment. Cliff moved to have Tim draft a letter for County Commission approval in support of this amendment. Kim seconded. Motion passed.

Good of the Order: None

Public Comment:

Jenna Diebel introduced herself as the new, Central Oregon Extension Forester. Jenna will start her new job (in Redmond) this week. Her position covers Crook, Deschutes, Jefferson Counties and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Her focus is on forestry education.

Don Vogel introduced the "Ochoco Conservation Association" a 501c3 group established to bring communities together around the future of the Greater Ochoco Ecosystem. This group is brand new and hopes to work with everyone in creating opportunities for more discussion and community participation in the management of our public lands. Shelley Santucci provided some background on the group and its desire to help bring people and ideas together. Andy asked if the group was going to have regular meetings. Don responded that yes that was the plan. The Group does not yet have a schedule and they have been very busy with getting organizational structure put together.

Jodie Barram, Oregon Living with Fire shared that she will be meeting with the County Commission to bring them up to date on their activities. OLWF has been working with the City of Prineville to support their Biomass project. They will be meeting with Regional Strategies to see how the State can move forward in supporting this project. On April 13, OLWF will hold a workshop in Prineville @ 4H Clover Building on home wildfire projection. This is a 3 hour workshop in the morning followed by a wildfire preparedness fair in the afternoon.

No other business, Melinda moved to adjourn. Frank Seconded. Motion Passed.

Next meeting is Wednesday, April 10th.