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Forest meeting draws a crowd

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Credit: Written by Bill Rautenstrauch, for The Observer | La Grande Observer | March 28, 2014 | [www.lagrandeobserver.com](http://www.lagrandeobserver.com) ~~

About 250 people jammed the Blue Mountain Conference Center Wednesday night to hear about a proposed revision of plans for the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests, and a portion of the Ochoco National Forest.

The Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision, still in the early phases of the public comment period, would update management practices on some 4.9 million acres of national forest land in the region. The revision includes a recommendation for an additional 90,800 acres of wilderness — 20,300 on the Wallowa-Whitman — but also proposes a doubling of timber harvest on the forests.

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Supervisor John Laurence said the plan seeks to achieve ecological integrity of the forests, while supporting the local community’s economic and social well-being.

“We’re looking for that sweet spot in the center where we can achieve those three goals,” Laurence said.

Federal law requires revision of forest plans every 10 to 15 years. The current revision effort began in 2003 with public workshops in communities throughout the region. County, state and tribal governments were consulting partners, as were other federal agencies with a stake in the process.

A co-convenor group was established in 2004, and meetings were held with other groups and individuals over the years. The Forest Service developed a range of alternatives and from those selected a preferred alternative.

The proposed revised plan is based on the preferred alternative.

Laurence said the preferred alternative addresses issues including forest access, ecological resilience, economic and social well-being, livestock grazing, old-growth forest and wilderness.

He said it’s important to remember that the plan is not site-specific, does not close roads or areas and does not address particular logging projects. He added, though, that a forest plan is used to guide those decisions on a case-by-case basis.

“The plan sets a context,” he said.

Laurence said the Forest Service believes that the preferred alternative, called Alternative E, supports goals and provides a variety of users with “a way to go out and do what they like to do.”

Logging done to support forest restoration would double, he said. On the wilderness issue, Laurence said that while the plan recommends additional wilderness, final approval rests with the U.S. Congress.

The Alternative E recommendation is for an additional 30,400 acres of wilderness on the Malheur, 40,100 on the Umatilla and 20,300 on the Wallowa-Whitman. The recommended wilderness expansion for the Wallowa-Whitman includes a 10,770-acre tract on the northern edge of the Eagle Cap Wilderness, and a 9,530-acre piece at Twin Mountain.

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La Grande Mayor Daniel Pokorney said he hopes the Forest Service will work to assure a steady supply of logs to local mills, and Lindsay Warness, forest policy analyst for Boise Cascade, said she thinks the plan places too much emphasis on management of dry forest areas, and not enough on cool, moist areas.

Eddie Garcia, a candidate for a seat on the La Grande City Council, said he believes that if local people had their way, the size of wilderness lands would stay the same. He said he wonders how much influence outside groups have on the process.

“I can tell you personally I haven’t received any pressure,” Laurence answered. “In scoping there were some people who wanted more (wilderness), and some people who wanted less.”

Greg Barreto, a Union County businessman running for state senator, asked Laurence about costs of setting up and monitoring a timber sale, versus the income the Forest Service gets from a sale. Laurence said he did not have a ready answer.

“If it’s a negative number, we the taxpayers have to pay for it,” Barreto said. “It would be nice if you guys made some money.”

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