

WAGING PEACE?

Partners forge solution to eastern Oregon's forest and mill crisis



The Forest Service faced worsening fire conditions in Oregon's Blue Mountains. An economic crisis loomed over the town of John Day. It took Forest Service leaders willing to innovate, a state government willing to pitch in, and a diverse group of stakeholders willing to cooperate. Ultimately, partners carved out a new solution – saving a mill and creating conditions for sustainable forests and communities.

THE CRISIS

In August 2012, Malheur Lumber Company announced it would close its John Day sawmill. The unemployment rate in Grant County was already 13.6 percent. Now 80 more people were about to lose their jobs.

“We couldn't find enough wood,” said Bruce Daucavage, president of the company that runs the mill, the last in a region where 80 percent of the forestland is federal.

This was awful news for Teresa Raaf, supervisor of the Malheur National Forest.

“Mills are vital to the restoration work we need to do,” she said. “A tool we needed was being swept aside.”

Raaf and her staff had been working to restore health to the forest, which was densely packed with small trees prone to bugs and uncharacteristic wildfire. This was the result of past logging and grazing practices, long-term fire suppression and a drop-off in active forest management. But their efforts were underfunded and not yielding many sawlogs.

A week later, U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden hosted the concerned parties at his office. Things started moving. Now, 18 months later, a unique 10-year Forest Service stewardship contract has been awarded. The mill is running, logging firms are hiring, and forest restoration is underway. Further, the state of Oregon is making unique investments in collaboratively developed work on federal land to advance the Malheur effort and other, similar endeavors.



Malheur National Forest wraps around the eastern Oregon town of John Day.



Teresa Raaf,
Malheur National
Forest supervisor

“This is a holistic approach to stewardship. It's about sustainable communities – ecologically, economically and socially...”



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WHAT DID IT TAKE TO FIND A SOLUTION?

- The Forest Service completed an unprecedented contract in record time. “The staff did two years’ work in six months. There had to be alignment higher up,” Raaf said.
- In awarding the contract, “We made ‘benefit to the local community’ significantly more important than price,” said Steve Beverlin, Raaf’s deputy.
- State government invested money and staff. “We typically think, ‘Oh, that’s the feds’ responsibility,’” said Chad Davis, senior policy analyst at the Oregon Department of Forestry. “When we partner, we can get things done.”
- Conservationists were on board. A collaborative group called Blue Mountain Forest Partners, involving diverse stakeholders, had been working since 2006 on restoration, so trust existed. “No way that contract would have happened without the collaborative,” said Susan Jane Brown, staff attorney with Western Environmental Law Center and a member of the collaborative. “It was a bumpy road, but what we ended up with is better than a court injunction. The impacts can be more long-lasting.”

Raaf sums it up: “This is a holistic approach to stewardship. It’s about sustainable communities – ecologically, economically and socially. It’s great what happened here, but as leaders we should remember we can do this without people nearly losing their jobs. It shouldn’t take a crisis.”



The contract ensures both accelerated restoration and a reliable, sustainable supply of logs.



BY THE NUMBERS

Grant County workforce: **3,800**

Jobs lost if mill had closed:
70 to 90

Malheur National Forest acreage:
1.7 million

Acres of the Malheur in need of restoration: **900,000**

Grant County forestland owned by the federal government:
80 percent

Lumber needed annually to viably run John Day mill:
30 to 40 million board feet

Malheur’s annual timber target before the stewardship contract:
13 million board feet

Malheur’s annual timber target after the stewardship contract:
More than 55 million board feet

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