United States Forest Service (USFS),

The Harney County Court is excited by the prospect of a more reasonable management tool as offered by the Blue Mountain Forest Plan revision, and was proud to be actively involved in the Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) guidance of this document.

In general, the Court believes that grazing and timber harvest are tools that must be used to actively manage our forest land to be more ecologically sound and wildfire resilient, regardless of factors not directly pertaining to overall landscape wellbeing such as economic viability(i.e., fine fuels and timber must be removed to prevent overgrowth and fire hazard, even if it falls outside of normal allotment grazing windows or timber sales receive no bids). The Court also does not support reduction of access on public lands.

We have attached two documents for reference: a table inspired by Harney Natural Resources Advisory Committee (NRAC) discussions that focuses primarily on grazing, and the comments which will be submitted by High Desert Partnership's (HDP) Forest Restoration Collaborative focusing primarily on forestry. The Court supports the particular technical recommendations made in these documents.

We look forward to working with USFS to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Respectfully submitted,

Harney County Court

Topic	Page	Comment
Fire and fuels	26	Desired condition #1 includes the text "The frequency, size, and severity of wildland fire is within the natural fire regime." We support this as a goal, but first you have to have fuels conditions that are "natural". We're not against having this text but it should read something like: "Create fuels conditions that are within the historic range of variability in service of keeping wildland fire within the frequency, size, and severity of the natural fire regime". They get at this point in desired condition #2, but we think they need to make abundantly clear that the most important thing we can do is to manage fuels conditions that are currently responsible for creating a very "unnatural" fire regime and that until we do so we will continue to experience catastrophic wildfire. This needs to be spelled out in simple terms that a judge could understand; e.g., " Over time, fire regime is a predictable consequence of fuels conditions.

		Therefore, the most important aspect of wildfire management is pre-wildfire fuels management.".
Grazing	83	In the 1st "guideline" I would add "crested wheatgrass and its allies" to the list of appropriate non-native forage species.
Grazing	83	Guideline #3 is a double edged sword. It allows for flexibility in the date of grazing return following fire, and that's better than a standard policy of, say, 2 years rest post-fire. But it is also loosely worded and leaves plenty of room for interpretation with respect to "recovery of desired vegetation conditions". What do those conditions look like? On balance this is probably OK, just me being cranky.
Grazing	84	If we were wording Management Approach #1 I would be more concerned about variables like intensity of use, duration of use, season of use…as opposed to thinking about resting for 1 or 2 growing seasons following a fire. Jon Bate's work shows how grazing is applied tends to matter more than period of rest following fire.
Ecology	84	In Management Approach #2, "ecological integrity" is NOT defined by acres treated or NEPA decisions. It is defined by plant composition, plant abundance, and soil factors.
Grazing	84	In Management Approach #3, the goal of targeted grazing should not be implied to be an increase in AUM's…this puts **targeted** grazing in the realm of permitted use (opening it up to protest) as opposed to what it should be, which is a tool (that happens to be based on grazing) that works in furtherance of an ecological management objective (e.g., fuels reduction). We're not arguing against grazing as a permitted use, but that needs to be distinguished from using grazing to accomplish an ecological management objective (as opposed to increasing AUMs). Think of it this way, if you could get targeted grazing as a fuels reduction tool stuck into NEPA then you could use it wherever needed and when you need it...the same as you could mowing or thinning for fuels reduction (assuming they are tools in NEPA). If you conflate targeted grazing with grazing as a permitted use, then targeted grazing for fuels reduction will be subject to the terms and conditions of a grazing permit (i.e., AUMs, season of use, etc.)...this is NOT a productive road to go down.

Riparian	84	Based on Management Approach #2, it sounds like the Multiple Indicator Monitoring protocol (MIM) will be used to monitor riparian conditions. At face value there's nothing wrong with the MIM protocol. The focus of MIM is to select a "Designated Monitoring Area" on a stream where all monitoring takes place. That approach can provide some valuable data on high level change over long periods of time. However, it is, to us, absolutely useless from a year-to-year management standpoint and MIM is specifically identified (see page 141 "Greenline") as the protocol to be used to measure annual indicators. Let's do an analogy. Let's say you have a 300 cow herd and you pick a "Designated Monitoring Cow" (DMC). As long as the DMC is doing well (no problems calving, good weight going into breeding, etc...) then the other 299 cows are doing well also, right? Obviously there are issues with that logic. The same logic problem occurs with riparian systems, which are incredibly variable throughout their length. For example, if you had a headcut start a half mile downstream from a DMA, it could take years for it to work its way up to the DMA; and by the time it did, you've basically lost a half mile of riparian habitat. Given the variability in conditions along a stream, what we need is a monitoring technique that can quickly and visually determine where along a WHOLE stream we are having problems with either streamside vegetation or channel stability (see comment 115 - 116), and then focus our management efforts where they are needed (which will change over time along a given stream). Bottom line is that in many cases an experienced riparian manager could drive along a stream at highway speed and tell you which areas are in need of management attention; we don't generally need detailed protocols to tell us where we need to work in a riparian system. We personally would push back HARD against using the MIM protocol for informing year-to-year management. It doesn't fit the complex realities of riparian management, it allocates a lot of valuable staff time to a largely useless process (from a year-to-year monitoring standpoint), and it has/will continue to be a point of needless conflict for these reasons.
Grazing/ riparian	114	Guideline #12 should include a determination of **why** a riparian area is not functioning as desired. As written, the assumption is that grazing must be reduced in areas not functioning as desired, without determination as to whether grazing is playing a role in that dysfunction.

Ecology/ Monitoring	129	Within the "Monitoring" section under "Ecological integrity of Systems", no information is provided and most information that is provided within the monitoring section relates to site-scale conditions or project evaluation. This is problematic in that if Ecological integrity of the forest is out of whack, then in some ways it doesn't matter what site conditions are...because even if they are great, and even if individual projects are wildly successful, the long-term prognosis is for a declining forest system. We think the very first bullet point within this section should be something like "Ecological Integrity of the Forest" and that the plan should include considerable effort to develop metrics for evaluating this. And, particularly with the advent of recent geospatial technologies, this can be done. We're not a forest ecologist but if we were taking a stab at this we would recommend thinking first about what the major threats to Ecological Integrity of the Forest are and developing an assessment and monitoring program around those items. For example, if catastrophic wildfire is a threat, what are current fuels conditions across the forest and how do those conditions relate to current and future integrity and how would planned projects affect or not affect that assessment? ... Or, if dysfunctional understory plant communities are a threat to ecological integrity, what is stand density across the forest and how is that impacting understory herbaceous plants that provide protection from runoff events (not to mention, forage for livestock)? To us it's really important to look at the ecological integrity of the forest first, because if you don't, then individual projects become random acts of conservation kindness as opposed to working in service of strategically managing for a healthy forest.
Riparian	110 +	The Riparian Management sections need to be more specific about "seasonal" or "intermittent" streams and how they will be managed. This is a continual point of friction between managers and permittees and the root of that friction is in policy. It needs to be spelled out here that seasonal/intermittent streams are, by definition, not perennial/year-round streams and will not provide the ecosystem services of perennial/year-around streams, and thus should not be managed as such. The reality of a dry forest system is that it's not as simple as classifying habitat as riparian or upland/forest. Intermittent streams that have properties of both riparian and upland habitats are quite common within the Blue mountains. That reality and how management will deal with that reality (including how they monitor intermittent streams...which should be different than perennial streams) needs to be better reflected in this plan.

Grazing/ riparian	115 - 116	For management approach #1 we personally would totally get rid of stubble height for informing grazing management. First, our research shows no support for a 4 to 6 inch stubble height rule with respect to vigor of streamside herbaceous vegetation. Second, what **does** matter takes a backseat to stubble height when stubble height numbers are included in the plan such that the numbers themselves become an excuse not to think about what actually matters. What actually does matter with respect to riparian health is 1) sufficient abundance of deep-rooted bank stabilizing streamside vegetation and 2) a functioning channel that is a) able to handle seasonal high flow conditions by accessing its floodplain and b) has a channel morphology that is able to maintain steamside water tables conducive to supporting deep rooted bank stabilizing vegetation. If you don't have either one of those things then stubble height is irrelevant...and having a 4 to 6 inch stubble height tells you nothing about the status of deep rooted veg or the health of the channel. Desired condition #5 on page 112 is a good description of what the management goal should be.
Monitoring	131 +	Table 30 describes indicators used to answer monitoring questions. However, some of the indicators are based on treatment implementation, not the **impact** that those treatments have or don't have relative to the monitoring question. This is a fundamental logic flaw...it's the equivalent of saying "I put money into the stock market, therefore I am rich". Question #13 within the table is a good example of this.
Formatting		Once the decision draft is complete we highly suggest changing the codes (e.g. FW-FOR-OLD-DC) to page numbers or section numbers. This code system is extremely difficult to understand where to refer back to in order to cross reference something. We understand it is difficult to update the page numbers until all edits are fully complete, but the effort will be so helpful for the reader and those implementing the plan after the Decision is made.
Grazing		All Standards & Guidelines that apply to livestock need to be consolidated into one area so they are easier to track and implement in the future. This should be done now, before a Decision, so it is easier to understand the expectations for livestock grazing managers. It is VERY difficult for those administering permits to sift through 235+ pages to determine all the requirements for livestock grazing. This should not be a document thrown together at the end, but a document included during the comment period.
Monitoring		The monitoring program and Appendix A only seem to address ESA critical habitat riparian areas or priority watersheds. What is the monitoring plan for non-ESA riparian areas and those not in the selected priority watersheds? This is very unclear in the document.

Note: Comments shown below address the section of the Forest Plan in relation to the Malheur National Forest, though principles also apply to sections of the Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla National Forests.

1.) Wildland Fire: Page 26

Summary Statement:

We agree with the desired characteristics for wildland fire. Wildfire is indeed a natural phenomenon in our Blue Mountains Forests, and fire has played a key ecological role for Dry Pine Forests east of the Cascades, which have historically been fire-resilient landscapes. We also agree with the objectives in principle and the emphasis being put on firefighter safety and expanding partnerships with local entities; however, in relation to the Malheur National Forest (MNF), 30,000 acres of fuels mitigation annually is inadequate. Given that this objective is related to what the Malheur National Forest could ecologically sustain, the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative believes this figure should be closer to 85,000 acres annually. This is especially true when including natural fire in this figure. This 85,000-acre figure also aligns with the historical 20- year fire return interval on the Malheur National Forest.

Desired Conditions (FW-WF-DC)

Add a desired condition that Mosaic-like patterns will exist on the landscape when wildfire works its way across a forest system in the Blue Mountains National Forests. A mosaic pattern is closely associated with lower severity fire, and allows for seed banks to restore burned areas at a quicker rate, leading to broader landscape recovery. See this article published in the ESA open-access journal that highlights the benefits of mosaic fire patterns in Dry Pine forests.

Objectives (FW-WF-OBJ)

The figures listed in the objective section should be much higher than currently listed. On the Malheur National Forest, 30,000 acres of fuels mitigation treatments annually is not sufficient to make a meaningful difference in wildfire severity on the landscape, especially when including natural fire in this footprint. According to the Property and Environment Research Center's interactive wildfire risk map, approximately 44% of Forest Service lands in the Western United States are at “severe wildfire risk”. In Oregon Congressional District 2, this figure is around 54%. This would mean approximately 918,000 acres on the Malheur National Forest are at “severe wildfire risk”, and this may be higher as this statistic is for the entirety of Oregon Congressional

District 2. With 30,000 acres treated annually, we would treat only around 1/3rd of fire fire-prone acreage on the Malheur National Forest. Therefore, this figure should be around 85,000 acres annually, which would align closer to the amount of acreage on the forest at severe wildfire risk in accordance with the 20-year fire return interval.

Examples of effective fuels mitigation treatments and practices supported by the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative include:

- Widening the prescribed burn window by starting prescribed fires earlier in the fall.
- Being proactive in seeking additional funds to pay for mechanical treatments, and utilizing
  non-federal partners to do so.
- Setting a quota in acres (or miles of road) for strategic fire breaks.
  Management Approach (FW-WF-MAPR)
  We support the focus on community protection areas and promoting fire-adapted landscapes and communities. We also applaud the move towards coordination with local entities to achieve these objectives.
  2.) Water Quality & Aquatic Ecosystems/Riparian Management: Pages 31, 112
  Summary Statement:
  On the forest-wide scale for water quality and aquatic ecosystems, we appreciate the connections made to promote water quality that support healthy riparian, aquatic, and wetland systems. We support the mindful approach of building infrastructure near key aquatic areas, and we tilt our hats toward the collaborative approach suggested by working with state, tribal, and local groups via partnerships.
  Regarding Riparian Management, we appreciate the comprehensive approach that the section suggests. For objectives, 6,000 acres of Riparian restoration/maintenance on the Malheur National Forest over the next decade provides a good footprint for work to get done at a meaningful scale. Actions such as silvicultural thinning and seeding/planting are particularly important for the recovery of native riparian species. We also like the adaptive approach to livestock management in Riparian Areas, specifically to maintain quality Riparian habitat and reduce streambank erosion. Using vegetation conditions and indicators as tools to guide livestock management provides a good approach that balances ecological health with economic benefits.

3.) Forested Vegetation: Page 36

Summary Statement:

We support the general principles of this section in promoting diverse forest vegetation and structure, and maintaining ecological integrity for wildlife while at the same time acknowledging human use and footprints on the landscape. We believe that promoting mechanical treatments and wildlife habitat goes together, as reducing canopy cover allows for shrubs and understory vegetation to thrive, therefore supporting ungulates and other wildlife (as stated in Forrester et. al., 2024). Similar to the section on Wildland Fire, we feel that 130,000 acres of mechanical treatment on the Malheur National Forest is on the low side, and may not sufficiently tackle the problem of degrading forest health, composition, and ecological integrity. We believe this figure should be a minimum of 25,000 acres annually, in order to transition the forest closer to the historical range of variability.

Objectives (FW-FOR-OBJ):

We believe that 130,000 acres of mechanical treatment on the Malheur National Forest would not be enough to meaningfully improve forest health, composition, and structural/ecological integrity. Published in 2024, one study on the Malheur National Forest analyzed basal areas at locations near Crawford Creek and Lookout Mountain. Researchers found pre-treatment basal areas of 179 and 240 square feet/acre at the plot study locations. Though variable on a forest-wide scale, these metrics indicate that vast portions of the forest have catastrophically high-density levels. Thus, to achieve management targets, the objective should be to treat a minimum of 25,000 acres via mechanical treatments annually.

4.) Aspen, Woodland, Shrubland, Grassland, Meadow, other non-forested habitats: Page 50

Summary Statement:

We appreciate this section emphasizing non-forested habitats. Though small in landmass compared to general forest habitats, they are crucial in providing biodiversity and variable cover types for wildlife. We support the general objectives of maintaining these non-forested habitats in accordance with historical levels, and preventing either expansion or encroachment of undesired species within or outside these habitats. The objectives for the section should be considerably higher in acreage than currently listed.

Objectives (FW-VEGNF-OBJ):

Overall, we view the objectives of the section as quite meager, and believe the restoration footprint should be considerably higher. For instance, 200 acres of Aspen stands restoration on the Malheur National Forest seems inadequate, given the level of deterioration the habitat type is seeing (according to a 2017 study done by Blue

Mountains Forest Partners, Aspen occupies only 20-50% of their former range on the Malheur National Forest). In 2010, the Damon Project on the Malheur National Forest authorized 619 acres of Aspen restoration across 190 sites, consisting of both commercial and non-commercial thinning of encroaching conifer. This figure shows it is possible to restore more lofty amounts of Aspen stands over the next decade. Therefore, in order for us to make progress towards the historical range of variability where Aspen and hardwoods made up around 5% of forest vegetation, we believe 1,000-1,700 acres per year of Aspen restoration should take place.

Reducing Juniper cover to less than 10% in Sagebrush habitat on the Malheur National Forest, on 800 acres per decade seems low given the degree of Juniper encroachment across the forest. In one project implemented near Venator Creek on the Emigrant Creek Ranger District, 77 acres of Juniper thinning were conducted across two separate units in 2011. Therefore 1,200 acres would be achievable, and a more meaningful footprint for Juniper Reduction work over the course of a decade. We are also concerned with the lack of mention of juniper outside of sagebrush habitat, within forested vegetation and riparian areas. We believe juniper in these areas should also be addressed and included in the above acreage figure.

Furthermore, maintaining only 5 meadows on the Malheur National Forest through conifer thinning seems meager, given the projection of 6,000 acres of riparian restoration over the next decade, and the prominence of wet meadows throughout the forest. Therefore, we believe 10% of wet meadow acreage should be treated or maintained annually, in order to conserve and grow this habitat under stress. See this article that describes the crucial importance of wet meadows in Dry Pine Forests for the health and diversity of understory vegetation. This article also highlights the importance of having variably sized wet meadows present within Dry Pine Forest systems.

Citations:

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