

THE DEATH OF A FOREST AND THE IDEOLOGY THAT KILLED IT:

Four Decades of Neglect in the Blue Mountains

By Carrie Matthews | September 21, 2026

INTRODUCTION

The Blue Mountains of Eastern Oregon and Washington are not suffering from a lack of planning. They are suffering from a lack of management.

Contrary to the narrative that the Forest Service has been "trying to fix" the forest since 2012, the reality is far more damning: Active management of the Blue Mountains ceased the moment the 1990 Plan was adopted.

For over 35 years, the Forest Service has not been a steward; it has been an executor of a "protection by inaction" ideology. Instead of following the 1990 Plan's mandate to actively manage the forest, the agency has spent decades closing roads, obliterating infrastructure, and slashing grazing permits. The result is a forest so overstocked and neglected that it is currently burning out of control.

SECTION 1: THE 1990 PLAN — A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTIVE STEWARDSHIP

When the 1990 Land Management Plan was adopted for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests, it was built on a pragmatic, working-landscape philosophy. It recognized that human intervention was essential for forest health.

The 1990 Plan explicitly authorized:

- **Road Networks:** A robust road system (approx. 3–12 miles per square mile in key zones) to facilitate timber harvest, fire response, and recreation.
- **Timber Harvest:** Clear targets for timber sales, not just for revenue, but as a critical tool for thinning dense stands to reduce fire risk.
- **Grazing:** Livestock grazing as a vital tool for fuel reduction and maintaining open

woodland structures.

The 1990 Plan was a contract: If the Forest Service followed it, the forest would be healthy, the economy would thrive, and fires would be manageable.

SECTION 2: THE GREAT BETRAYAL — 35 YEARS OF MANAGEMENT BY NEGLECT

The tragedy of the Blue Mountains is that the Forest Service never actually implemented the 1990 Plan as written. From the moment it was signed, the agency began a slow, deliberate process of dismantling the very tools the plan relied on.

Section 2.1 — The Road Closures and Obliteration

Caption: Once access was removed, the forest became a “Lock it up and let it burn” management system









While the 1990 Plan authorized road access, the Forest Service spent the last three decades closing and removing roads.

- The Action: In the name of "water quality" and "wildlife protection," the agency has closed thousands of miles of roads, often using heavy machinery to obliterate them.
- The Violation: The 1990 Plan allowed for these roads to maintain forest health. By destroying them, the agency made it impossible to access the forest for thinning, logging, or fire suppression.
- The Result: The forest became a fortress. When the Hagen, Paradise, McCully, Salmon, and Olive Butte Fires started, crews couldn't get in. Roads were gone.

Section 2.3 — The Timber Sale and Grazing Collapse

Caption: "This is what an unharvested forest looks like after ignition. The trees that should have been thinned into lumber became fuel instead."



Grazing was a key part of the 1990 Plan's fuel-reduction strategy.

- The Action: The Forest Service systematically reduced or eliminated grazing permits, often citing "endangered species" or "water quality" concerns.
- The Violation: The 1990 Plan recognized grazing as a legitimate, necessary activity. By removing it, the agency denied itself a cheap, effective way to reduce fuel loads.
- The Result: Grasses and shrubs grew unchecked, adding to the fuel load that now feeds the fires.
- The Action: Timber sales dropped to near-zero in many areas, not because of a lack of trees, but because of bureaucratic hurdles and legal challenges.
- The Violation: The 1990 Plan set clear targets. The agency ignored them.
- The Result: Millions of acres of forest were left to grow too dense, too fast.

SECTION 3: THE TRAVEL MANAGEMENT FARCE — 2005 TO PRESENT

If the road closures were the physical act of neglect, the Travel Management Rule saga was proof of institutional incompetence.

- November 9, 2005 — USDA issues the National Travel Management Rule, requiring every national forest to designate roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicle use.
- May 3, 2007 — Wallowa-Whitman publishes its Notice of Intent, beginning local implementation.
- June 19, 2009 — Draft Environmental Impact Statement published.
- February 21, 2012 — Record of Decision signed, then immediately withdrawn. Five years of analysis and taxpayer money erased overnight.
- March 2015 — Pacific Northwest Regional Forester directs both the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur to defer all travel management work until the Blue Mountains Forest Plan revision is complete.
- 2019 — Six eastern Oregon counties petition to exempt the forests from the rule entirely.
- 2026 — Project listed as "Cancelled" on the Forest Service website.

The Upshot: The Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur are reportedly the only two units in the entire National Forest System that have never complied with the 2005 rule. This is not "access for all"; it is regulatory chaos.

Section 4 — Planning Paralysis

Caption: "Residents keep score. Thirty-five years of drafts, deferrals, and withdrawn decisions produced this."





The Great Stagnation: 14 Years of “Planning”

In 2012, the Forest Service initiated a revision process that would turn the Blue Mountains into a poster child for bureaucratic failure. Instead of implementing the 1990 Plan, the agency decided it needed a “new vision.” When the Forest Service



launched the Plan Revision process in 2012, it was not an attempt to fix the problem. It was an ideological weapon to justify further restrictions.

- 2014 Draft: Proposed fewer roads and less timber. Rejected by the community.
- 2018 Draft: Proposed the same restrictions. Agency backed down.
- 2026 Draft: Proposes the same restrictions again.

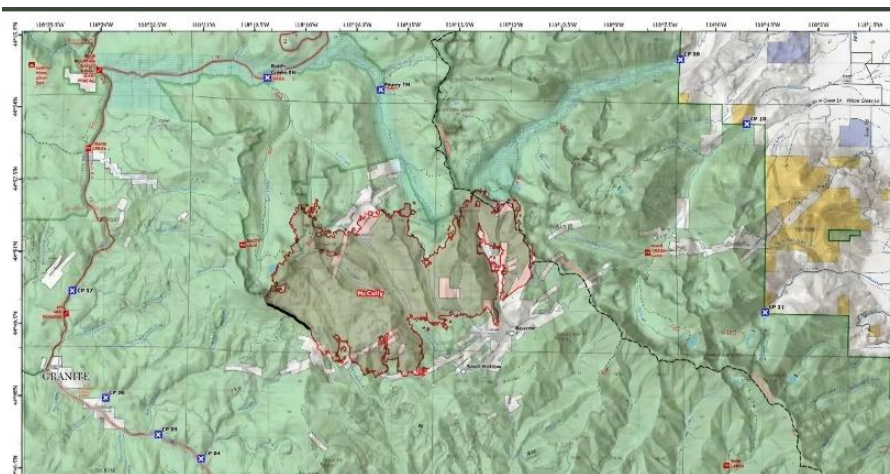
The Lie: The agency claims it is revising the plan to improve management.

The Truth: The agency is using the revision to legally bind itself to a future of less management.

Section 5 — The Cost of the Ideology

Caption: Taxpayer dollars are wasted on planning inactive management. The public had rejected these proposals time and time again, yet the Forest Service continues the insanity. The cost of fighting fires as a consequence is negligence and must stop.





- Financial Waste: approximately 25M+ (they make it difficult to track) was spent on planning, meetings, and legal defense.
- Fire Crisis: Hundreds of millions spent fighting fires like the. Hagen, Paradise, McCully, Salmon, and Olive Butte Fires (just to name a few).
- Economic Collapse: Local timber and grazing industries decimated.
- Ecological Collapse: Forest now vulnerable to catastrophic fire, insects, and disease.

SECTION 6: THE CASUALTIES NO ONE COUNTS











The budget tables record suppression costs. They do not record what else burns. This is death in a single afternoon. These animals survived seventy years of grazing permits and timber sales under the 1990 Plan. They did not survive the overstocked forest that replaced management. Closing access does nothing but destroy the very wildlife the Forest Service claims to care so deeply about.

Livestock operations ended the same way. The ranchers whose grazing permits were slashed in the name of forest health are now hauling carcasses off ground their families have worked for generations.





SECTION 7: THE SOLUTION — RETURN TO THE 1990 PLAN

1. Immediate Adoption of the 1990 Plan. It is legally valid and provides the only framework for active management.
2. Restore Road Access. Open the roads. Fix the bridges. Rebuild what the 1990 Plan authorized.
3. Resume Grazing and Logging. Use these tools to thin the forest and reduce fuel loads.
4. Stop the Planning. Halt the 2026 revision process. Stop planning and start managing.

CALL TO ACTION — THREE DEADLINES TO END THE NEGLECT

1. Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision (Wallowa-Whitman)

- **Portal:** **CARA Database** (Comment Analysis and Response Application)
- **Link:** <https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=301397>
- **Deadline:** September 30, 2026
- *Tip: This portal is specifically designed for Forest Service plan revisions and allows you to view comments from others.*

2. Roadless Rule Rescission

- **Portal:** **Regulations.gov**
- **Docket ID:** FS-2025-0001
- **Link:** <https://www.regulations.gov/docket/FS-2025-0001>
- **Deadline:** October 6, 2026

3. Removal of the 2005 Planning Rule

- **Portal:** **Regulations.gov**
- **Docket ID:** FS-2026-0067 (Associated with RIN 0596-AD74)
- **Link:** <https://www.regulations.gov/document/FS-2026-0067-0001>
- **Deadline:** July 31, 2026 (*Note: This deadline has passed, but that doesn't mean you can't reach out to those who will make the decisions*)

Here is their contact information:

1. Decision Authority

* ****Brooke Rollins**** — U.S. Secretary of Agriculture

* The Secretary of Agriculture is the ultimate rulemaking authority for the Forest Service and signs all final rules.

* ****Office:**** 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20500

* ****Phone:**** (202) 456-1111

* ****Email:**** Contact via official form at usda.gov or X (@SecRollins)

2. Agency Signatory / Rulemaking Officer

* ****Michael Boren**** — Under Secretary, Natural Resources and Environment

* He is the named signatory on the proposed rule document (Federal Register 2026-13281, July 1, 2026). He oversees the Forest Service and natural resources policy for the USDA.

* ****Address:**** USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20250

3. Forest Service Leadership

* ****Tom Schultz**** — Chief, U.S. Forest Service (21st Chief)

* As Forest Service Chief, he leads the agency's policy direction and is the primary face of the "Directives Modernization" initiative.

Email: fs.chief@usda.gov

Phone: (202) 205-1464 (Operator)

* ****Address:**** USDA Forest Service, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20250

4. Direct Rulemaking Contact (Docket Point of Contact)

The Federal Register notice for this specific docket lists the ****Forest Service Policy Office**** as the primary contact for questions and comments:

* ****Forest Service Policy Office****

* ****Phone:**** (202) 205-1464

* ****Email:**** sm.po.directivemodernization@usda.gov

* **Mail:** USDA-Forest Service, Sidney Yates Building, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20250

* **Comments Portal:** <https://www.regulations.gov/docket/FS-2026-0067>

5. Administrative/Regulatory Contact

* **Kristen Grifka** — USDA Regulatory Affairs Contact

* **Phone:** (771) 216-0542

* **Email:** kristen.grifka@usda.gov

* **Address:** 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20250

Note on the Process

This is currently a **Proposed Rule** stage (NPRM). The public comment period closed on **July 31, 2026**. After comments are reviewed, the Forest Service will issue a Final Rule, which will be signed by the Secretary of Agriculture (Brooke Rollins) based on the work of the Under Secretary (Michael Boren) and Forest Service Chief (Tom Schultz). For any immediate inquiries about the docket, the **Policy Office** email above is the most direct channel.

CONCLUSION

The Blue Mountains are dying because the Forest Service has spent 35 years violating the 1990 Plan instead of following it. They have stifled logging, closed roads, destroyed infrastructure, and slashed grazing permits.

The current fire crisis is not an accident. It is the inevitable result of a forest left unmanaged for decades.

Go back to the 1990 Plan. Log and thin the forests. Fix the roads. Stop the fires.

The deadlines are here. The time to act is now.