

USDA Forest Service Releases Final Instructions on Objections for Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revisions

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Portland, Ore. – March 14, 2019 – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service has released final objection instructions for the Umatilla, Malheur, and Wallowa-Whitman Forest Plan Revisions. The Regional Forester has been instructed to withdraw the draft Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and the three Revised Plans.

Forest Service Acting Deputy Chief and Reviewing Officer Chris French issued a letter to Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa explaining his instruction.

“Many factors compounded to produce revised plans that would be difficult to implement,” said French. “While my review did not identify any specific violations of law, regulation, or policy, significant changes occurred over the 15-year time period of the planning process.”

French added that a number of plan modifications occurred that were often complex and not well understood, and there were a number of changes in organizations, stakeholders, and key Forest Service staff. The Revised Plans also did not fully account for the unique social and economic needs of local communities in the area. “The resulting plans are very difficult to understand, and I am concerned that there will be ongoing confusion and disagreement as to how each Revised Plan is to be implemented,” added French.

The Forest Plans for the Umatilla, Malheur, and Wallowa-Whitman have been under revision for nearly 15 years. The Final EIS, three Revised Plans, and the draft Record of Decision were released in June 2018 for the pre-decisional objection process. Approximately 350 objections were filed on a variety of issues, most significant being access and travel management, impacts of the plan decisions on local communities, the Aquatic and Riparian Conservation Strategy, wildlife issues, and forest management. Objection resolution meetings were held in five different communities in November and December of 2018. Over 300 people participated voicing concerns and clarifying objections on a wide variety of issues.

“I recognize the hard work and commitment of your employees over the last 15 years,” French explained. “I also realize how much dedication, energy, time, and effort that the public has put into this process. I am confident that the information and data collected and analyzed, as well as the breadth of objection issues, can be used to inform our next steps.”

Existing Land and Resource Management Plans, as amended, will remain in place as the Forest Service determines next steps for the Umatilla, Malheur, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests.

In the coming months, Forest Service officials will engage stakeholders to explore ways of working together to support a path forward on shared priorities including strengthening local economies, reducing wildfire risk, ensuring access, and supporting healthier watersheds.

“We are committed to the responsible stewardship of National Forest System lands and confident that we can find common ground for the long-term sustainable management of these forests,” said Regional Forester Casamassa. “I look forward to joining local and state officials, partners, Tribes, and members of the public to explore how we can best work together in shared stewardship to pursue common objectives.”

More information on the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision Objection and Resolution Process can be found [here](#).

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