



History of the Malheur National Forest

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Photos provided by the Western History Room of the Harney County Library
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For those that call Harney County home, the Malheur National Forest is an essential part of our identity. It's where we work, live, recreate, and so much more. As such, our relationship with the forest is storied and multifaceted.



Pictured: View looking up a forested road toward rocky peaks. Typewritten caption enclosed with photo reads: "John Day Highway to Burns, Ore. No. 57 Route 28, 1940s"

Founded in 2008, it's been the mission of the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative to ensure our relationship with the southern portion of Malheur National Forest remains balanced, healthy, and beneficial for all going forward. Central to achieving that mission is understanding how the relationship has evolved, and where we are now to help inform management for interests from all sides in the future.

Early Inhabitants

Before Euro-Americans reached the land that currently comprises the Malheur National Forest, it was occupied by the Northern Paiute Tribe. While the tribe's greater territory included 5,250 square miles that stretched across Northwest California, Western Idaho, Northern Nevada, and Southeast Oregon, the land that's now the Malheur National Forest belonged to the Wadatika Band.

Euro-American Arrival

It wasn't until the 1820's that the first Euro-Americans made their presence known in this country now called the Malheur National Forest. The Hudson Bay Company hired Scottish trapper, Peter Skene Ogden, to create a beaver "fur desert" in southeast Oregon with the hope of discouraging trappers from entering the area and claiming it for the United States. Ogden's accounts of travel along the Silvie's River and south and main forks of the John Day River date from 1824 through 1827.

Even though the majority of westbound settlers stayed to the north along the Oregon Trail, Euro-Americans continued to make their presence known in what would eventually become the Malheur National Forest. With their arrival came a host of new interests that would quite literally shape the landscape for years to come.

In 1845, a lost wagon train led by Stephen Meek was reported to have found gold in a stream in the Blue Mountains. Though accounts of the Blue Bucket Mine's existence were never confirmed, the rumor reached miners who came from far and wide looking to strike it rich.

Gold was indeed found in Canyon Creek almost 20 years later in 1862. Within weeks, more than 5,000 people were scouring the area and gold was found in a number of drainages. Historians report that at one point, the town of Canyon City boasted a larger population than Portland. Before long, the Northern Paiute's ways of managing the land were quickly forgotten or ignored. Replacing them were new uses for the land and new interests: mining, ranching, and logging. Having for centuries remained only altered by Mother Nature and the Paiutes and their ancestors who had called the land home for thousands of years, the land of the Malheur National Forest began to change.

A Power Struggle Ensues

The discovery of vast natural resources in the Blue Mountains brought with it contention between the Northern Paiutes and Euro-Americans. The former refused to cede lands and confrontations between the groups were common.

In 1869 an Executive Order was signed into law establishing 1.8 million acres as the Malheur Reservation. Due to poor management of the Malheur Reservation in the late 1870's creating near starvation conditions combined with the Bannock - Paiute uprising of 1878, many Paiutes left the reservation. As a punishment for the uprising the Malheur Reservation was terminated and opened for settlement by Euro-Americans.

Federal Government Steps In

At the same time when ranching and logging were on the verge of becoming big business, the federal government began taking an active interest in management of lands in the American West.

In 1876 Congress enacted the Office of Special Agent in the Department of Forestry to survey the conditions of forests in the U.S. Just five years later, that office expanded and became the Division of Forestry. The momentum didn't stop there. In 1891, the Forest Reserve Act was passed. It allowed the President to declare western lands as "forest reserves." Oversight was charged to the Department of Interior until 1905 when Theodore Roosevelt transferred the responsibility to a new entity called the United States Forest Service.

The Malheur National Forest is Born

On June 13, 1908, President Roosevelt established the Malheur National Forest. It was named after the Malheur River. The word Malheur is French for misfortune. In this case, it was the specific misfortune of the aforementioned Peter Skene Ogden who had his property and furs stolen sometime in either 1825 or 1826.

By 1920, the presence of Wadatika Northern Paiutes was a sliver compared to only some 50 years earlier while a burgeoning timber industry and the presence of vast cattle ranches were reaping the riches of the newly designated National Forest.

Early United States Forest Service Policy and Motivations



A major motivation for what would become the United States Forest Service was forest fire in the West. Specifically, the "Big Blowup" of 1910 that burned more than three million acres in Montana, Idaho, and Washington in 48 hours had a "profound effect on National Forest policy" according to the Forest History Society.

Pictured: Wallace, ID, 1910.

Initial National Forest policy held that such fires could have been prevented, or at least contained had there been enough manpower. The line of thought made its way clear to Washington D.C. where it became the belief that total and absolute fire suppression was the path forward for forest management. ". . . fire suppression increasingly served as a mission and rationale for the young

agency . . . Protecting forests from fires that typically burned 8 to 20 million ha [one ha or hectare is 100 acres] annually well into the 1930s was a primary activity of Forest Service rangers from 1905 through WWII. But after WWII, demand for housing transformed the Forest Service. Timber companies that had eschewed USFS timber before the war scrambled to meet demand by buying federal timber and the US Forest Service enjoyed large Congressional appropriations to develop an extensive road system and staff the agency with professional foresters and engineers. By the 1960s, almost a third of softwood sawtimber consumed in the US was being produced by western US national forests," shares James Johnston Research Associate in the College of Forestry at Oregon State University.

For the Malheur National Forest and Harney County, it was the Edward Hines Lumber Company that reaped the benefits initially. In June of 1928, the company purchased 67,400 acres in the Bear Valley that was previously held in the hands of the

Malheur National Forest. Subsequently, the Hines Mill opened for business early in 1930. An initial investment of \$7 million proved vital for county residents and the economy just before the Great Depression. The company town of Hines was born.



The onset of WWII brought about an increased demand for timber products. Many of the men employed at the company mill left to join the Armed Forces and their posts were filled by women who previously stayed at home.

Pictured: Harney Valley Lumber Company Office. Small wooden building located under a grove of

ponderosa pine trees. A sign above the door of the building reads " Office Harney Valley Lumber Company". A man identified as Elmore E. Purington, owner of the lumber company, stands to the left of the building. Purington's wife, Cora, and daughter, Helen, pose standing in the snow in front of the building.

Even though the mill experienced a strike in 1945, it quickly expanded operations to the towns of Baker, Dee, and Bates. With the expansion came the need for more infrastructure in the form of logging roads, cattle guards, and bridges. Today, these installments provide the residents of Harney County much of the access they've come to covet in the Malheur National Forest for hunting, fishing, camping, and general outdoor recreation.

At the same time, the anti-fire policy was in direct opposition to many of the views held by the people that lived in and around the Malheur National Forest. Many people were in favor of light burning because of the favorable land conditions it created for wildlife, riparian zones, tree density, annual water availability, and grazing.

Despite firsthand accounts of people like those that called the Malheur National Forest home, the Federal Government continued its practice of preventing fire at all costs. In 1933 the Civilian Conservation Corps employed thousands to build firebreaks and fight fires. Furthermore, the 10:00am policy became a cornerstone by establishing that all fires should be put out by 10:00am the morning after they were reported. In Harney County, management of the Malheur National Forest was complex and intertwined.

A Change of Course and New Players in the Game

In the 1960's research emerged suggesting that fire played an important role in forest ecology and health. Nearly a decade later, the Forest Service realized a change in policy that allowed fire to burn when and where appropriate. The policy allowed fires to burn in wilderness and other largely uninhabited areas where it could have the natural impacts on the landscape it had previously for thousands of years prior. But the overarching attitude remained that fire was bad.

In the 1970's, when the research of the previous decade was realized, Oregon's timber industry was going great guns. According to Oregon Office of Economic Analysis, the following held true:

- The 1970s saw more than eight billion board feet of timber harvested.
- The timber sector employed more than 80,000 people.
- Wages for top earners were 30% above the state average.
- One of every ten private sector jobs was tied to timber or logging.
- The industry accounted for 12% of state GDP and 13% of private sector wages.

These figures were especially magnified in rural communities where timber and mills, much like the town of Hines, relied on the industry for economic strength and health.



Pictured: Al C. Welcome at work inside Edward Hines Lumber mill. In the background, a man operates a head rig saw.

While this certainly held true in the community of Hines, and the Malheur National Forest continued to provide the resource in the form of timber, not all was kosher at the mill. In the late 1960's workers went on strike three times in two years. Modernization and computerization replaced the need for human labor. Soaring timber prices and a decrease in demand slowed production. Plywood mill operations were shut down in 1980.

Even though a new sawmill was built in 1981 and production and profits improved, the Hines Company removed itself from all lumber operations in Oregon. Old-growth resources were all disappearing at an alarming rate, the Malheur National Forest included.

While critics of the logging and cattle industries held that both wreaked havoc on the land, such wasn't necessarily the case in Harney County.

In fact, the forest management policies in the Malheur National Forest were well ahead of their time in terms of keeping the ecology and landscape healthy and sustainable. People understood the importance of preserving mature trees, minimizing the impact of roads, logging operations, and using fire responsibly.

Such was not the case at the national level, however. The policy of the Forest Service remained one of almost total prevention and suppression of fire. The result in other parts of the country were forests with too many young trees and too much undergrowth, all which only provided more fuel for fire, quite literally.

Where are We at Today and What Role Does the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative Play?

Cattle ranchers in Harney County still graze their cattle on forest land. And the residents of Harney County continue to utilize the Malheur National Forests for hunting, fishing, camping, all kinds of recreation and logging does still occur with the lumber sent to a mill in John Day.



Pictured: A community picnic in the forest.

The interests in the forest remain multifaceted and managing it sustainably for all remains the central concern. The Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative provides the table where a diverse group meets and works together to find common ground solutions to improve the declining state of sustainability on the Southern Malheur National Forest that includes: creating fire tolerant and diverse ecosystems, increasing economic capacity by supporting new and existing markets, and improving the ability to restore forests on a landscape scale.

High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convenes and supports six collaboratives including the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.

