Harney County Restoration Collaborative
Summary of Sept. 28, 2015 Dove Project Tour

Participants: Jason McGovern, Dana Skelly, Howard Richberg, Brian Speeg, Melissa Ward, Josh Giles, Lori Bailey - USFS Brandyn Stix – Burns Paiute Tribe, Fred Hellbusch - concerned citizten, Amy Stiner- So. Fork John Day River Watershed Council, Karen Coulter- Blue Mtns. Biodiversity Project, Zach Williams-Iron Triangle, Ryan Torland, Tom Segal, Rod Klus – ODFW, Jim Campbell- Farmer, Brooks Smith, Larry Blasing- Grant Co. Public Forest Commission, Jon Reponen – BLM, Brenda Smith – High Desert Partnership

The Harney County Restoration Collaborative went on a tour of two sites on the Dove Project on Monday Sept. 28, 2015. We looked at two very different sites. The first was on the side of the steep canyon above Venator Creek which drains west towards the South Fork of the John Day River. The second was a moderately stocked stand of Ponderosa Pine where Josh Giles was proposing to create a five-acre gap or opening.

Prior to examining Site 1, Jack Southworth asked participants for their thoughts on the Canyon Creek Fires that occurred in Grant Co. in Aug/Sept. A few of the main points were:

- Conditions were ripe for a fire of this nature, weather conditions on the days that the fires blew up there was very little anyone could do.
- Primarily a result of climate change – drought and climate conditions. Need to shift thinking from all fires are catastrophic to the ecological significance of fires.
- The fires were fed from overstocking of too many small diameter trees.
- Everyone involved did the best they could do under the circumstances.
- There seems to be evidence that when the fires hit areas that had been managed it calmed down.
- Doesn't appear to have any large herds of wildlife loss.
- The fires covered 110,000 acres, 90,000 acres USFS managed land, 85,000 acres wilderness area, 10,000 private or other. The USFS has a video they hope to make public for factual events on the fires.

Stop One – Steep Canyon along Venator Creek

At our first stop Howard Richburg said "We're looking for opportunities. We're trying to reduce fuel loads – especially fir – in what is supposed to be an open pine site. The encroaching fir is creating an increased fire risk to the older pine.

Howard said they – the Forest Service – propose to reduce the riparian buffer and still meet riparian objectives. There will be no equipment in treatment areas – all commercial harvest would be done by hi-lead cable with one end of the logs suspended to reduce soil disturbance. Only trees less than 21" dbh would be cut or harvested. "There are plenty of larger trees available for a commercial harvest," Howard said. Hope to end up with a basal area in a range of 30 to 80. "We want to be flexible in our prescription," Howard said.

There are seven or eight small units with a total harvest area of 81 acres.

Comments:

- Nice to release the bitterbrush on the south facing slopes.
- Without treatment this area would burn really hot.
- Is there a better, more economical place to log? Reply: Yes, but if we don't include this area in the restoration project and get the NEPA planning done we lose all opportunity for ever treating this area.
- It would help if we had an overall strategic plan for treating fuels on this project.
- Doing the NEPA planning will help handle the economics of doing this project.
- Overall on the forest there is a lack of commercial trees in the 10" to 21" range. Really skeptical of commercial value of this project.
  Response: The Forest Service has possible different sources of funding that we can utilize for different treatments. In order to do treatments if funding becomes available would like to include this project in the NEPA planning.

- An extreme fire would cause more sedimentation than a commercial harvest project. It's not all about the economic viability. Compare cost of firefighting to cost of treatment. Is it necessarily bad to subsidize the cost of logging and thinning if it is less than the cost of putting out a fire?
- The downstream landowners concerns are wildfire and water. This treatment would decrease the chance or severity of wildfire and increase downstream flows.
- This currently isn't how this hillside ought to look. Get it to ecologic sustainability and implement it so it is done right.
- Accumulate steep cable harvest units across the forest until there are enough to be commercially viable.
- Focus on the restoration – not the economics.
- Important to keep in mind that logging is subsidizing the restoration work on this forest – not the other way around.
- We've been subsidizing commercial harvest on the southern Malheur forever. Now we're being more transparent about it.
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Tour participants agreed to this Consensus Statement at Stop One:

- **Go ahead with the NEPA analysis for non-commercial and commercial harvest on 81 acres of steep ground along Venator Creek.**
- **Reduce basal area to a range of 30 – 80.**
- **Use suspended cable system to do commercial harvest.**
- **Harvest no trees >21".**
- **Recognize there is a concern about commercial viability and the need to retain more trees in the 10 to 21" range for future commercial harvest.**
- **Make sure concerns about erosion are addressed.**

Josh Giles coring a large diameter tree at Site 2 in the Dove Project area. This tree was over 21" in diameter but aged out at about 60 years.

Stop Two: Potential five-acre opening every 50 acres

Stop Two was along the 47 Road at the southern side of the Dove Project area. Josh Giles wanted input in creating a five-acre opening as part of a commercial treatment. The stand was moderately stocked at present and a pretty even-aged stand.

Josh's reasons for creating five acre gaps every 50 acres or so:

- Creates spatial heterogeneity and a less homogenous forest.
- Want a range of basal areas across the forest.
- Higher densities on north facing slopes, lower densities with more gaps on south facing slopes.

Comments:

- If you're going to open up a five-acre gap do it on a low productivity site – not here where there are a lot of good trees.
- May not be a lot of shrub release here.
- Need skips and gaps. We're too homogenous across the forest. Need some areas where we can restart the process. Hope the gaps will be more open on Dove.
- Have seen better sites for creating a gap than this which has old growth stumps in it. Like the idea but build on more of an opening and in a hotter, drier site or a site with potential to grow more shrubs. Build on historical openings.
- Like the idea of bigger gaps, of more diversity to change it up a little.
- As an elk hunter, I think there are a lot more openings than there should be.
- Need to prioritize implementation across disciplines. Need to figure out what is important.

- We're lacking in stand initiation phase across the forest. Need all stages but it is definitely harder to get a big tree than it is an opening.
- There's a tendency to thin from below and leave the biggest and end up looking like a tree farm.
- This is a poor site for an opening – too close to a major road – for big game security.
- Josh's response: Our vision for this project is wider opening with multiple story stands with areas of intense brush. We're trying to increase the heterogeneity and restore fire low severity fire to the landscape. There are thousands of acres on this project we're not touching. This part of the forest is a long ways from being a tree farm.

Tour participants agreed to this Consensus Statement at Stop Two:

- **We're OK with gaps but focus more on areas in drier sites and build on existing openings.**
- **Be strategic.**
- **Want multiple-story stand retained for the future.**
- **Consider trade-offs for elk and deer, commercial viability and other considerations as needed.**

Tour concluded at 2 p.m.

Lt to Rt: Jon Reponen, Jim Campbell, Tom Segal, Brenda Smith, Amy Stiner, Fred Hellbusch, Dana Skelly and Jason McGovern ponder increasing spatial heterogeneity up, down and sideways.

Notes submitted by Jack Southworth & Brenda Smith