

PNW Interagency Natural Areas Committee

Meeting Notes

February 8, 2012

Attendees: Noel Bacheller (Oregon State Parks), Walter Briggs (US Navy), Tom DeMeo (Forest Service, R6), Louisa Evers (Bureau of Land Management), Jimmy Kagan (Oregon Biodiversity Information Center), Mark Mousseaux (Bureau of Land Management), Curt Pavola (Washington DNR), Gaston Porterie (Forest Service, PNW), David Wilderman (Washington DNR), Todd Wilson (Forest Service, PNW).

(1) Agency updates

Forest Service

Several research-management partnerships involving Research Natural Areas (RNAs) were created or continued in 2011, including consultations and/or site visits between the PNW Research Station and 9 of the 17 forests in Region 6. Additionally, seven new research projects were initiated on RNAs by PNW and various agencies, universities, and organizations. Most of the management activities on RNAs were focused on weed control and/or reducing fire fuel loads to help restore natural processes in dry forests. Several Forests continue to work towards formal establishment of RNAs, including proposal of several new RNAs in the upcoming revision to the Forest Plan for the Blue Mountain region which will help fill a number of important missing ecological elements for that region as outlined in the Oregon Natural Areas Plan.

Oregon State Parks/Oregon Biodiversity Information Center

The Oregon Natural Area Program has been transferred from Department of State Lands (DSL) to Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD). New draft rules have been developed, mostly converting the DSL language to OPRD, but with the potential for some substantive changes. The Oregon Natural Heritage Advisory Council has been abolished, but OPRD is considering using some of the council members, and finding some more, to potentially provide the director with advice related to natural areas registration and dedication, as well potential directions the program should take. OPRD is collecting and assessing the materials it is inheriting, and will be formulating goals for management and potential growth of the program in the coming weeks and months. Decisions related to the formation or continuation of an advisory group will also be made in the coming months.

DSL has been looking at disposing of many isolated properties. Some of these are significant natural areas, and some are formally recognized as state natural areas under the State Natural Areas plan. One of these properties in particular, Woodcock Creek, is adjacent to an existing RNA, and is very important. Selling the property to another public landowner in the area that would manage the property for its natural area values would make it possible for DSL to meet its common school fund requirements at the same time as the property's being retained in the system of state natural areas. If sold to BLM or USFS, the change of hands could result in an increase in the size of the natural area due to adjacent similar lands. Other DSL properties being considered

for disposal are also of interest, and consideration of their continuing or potential status as State Natural Areas in the program's portfolio would be beneficial to the Interagency Natural Areas effort as a whole. The sale of the Steens Summit State Natural Area from DSL to BLM is either complete, or almost complete. Since the surrounding property is all protected from grazing, and is a wilderness, the transfer of the designation to the BLM, with new boundaries should be considered (or addressed).

Washington DNR

Washington DNR is facing the impacts of the state budget reductions from the 2011 Legislative Session with additional tightening of the Natural Areas Program budget and a large reduction in base funding for the Natural Heritage Program. No staff reductions have occurred due to the most recent budget reduction, however the Heritage Program is needing to backfill about half of their annual budget. John Gamon and Pene Speaks are working on that today instead of attending this meeting. While the Heritage Program is funded largely with project-related contracts, they need the state funds as match, and those state funds will likely be exhausted in the next few months. An outreach effort is underway to find additional support for the program.

US Navy

The Navy is in the process of updating the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP) for Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility Boardman, Oregon. Commonly called the Boardman Bombing Range, this property has a dedicated (April 1980) Research Natural Area. The INRMP update includes a project proposal to realign the boundary of the RNA, with a net acreage increase.

Bureau of Land Management

2011 Accomplishments:

Guide books were created for 3 RNA's on the Eugene District (Mohawk, Fox Hollow, and Upper Elk Meadows RNA's)

Native Grass Seed was collected within the Powell Butte RNA for restoration actions within the RNA (trespass disturbance)

The Woodcock creek DSL parcel was reviewed for potential addition to Woodcock Bog RNA, and proposed to Medford BLM for acquisition. Medford BLM did not approve asking the Land Water Conservation Fund for out-year funds for acquisition. Effort to adequately protect this parcel will continue.

The State Office coordinated with Eastside Districts on RMP revisions addressing ACEC's/RNA's

2012 Proposed:

Installation of replicated permanent long-term vegetation plots and creation of guidebooks for 6 RNA's on the Medford District are proposed: Round Top RNA, North Fork of Silver Creek RNA, Lost Lake RNA, Holton Creek RNA, Pipefork RNA, and Scotch Creek RNA.

Install permanent long-term vegetation plots in Table Rocks ACEC (Upper and Lower Table Rocks)

Install vegetation plots on 3 RNA's on the Burns District

(2) Natural areas climate change monitoring program for OR/WA.

An OSU master's student (Maggie Massie) was brought on in January to assist PNW with this program, which includes an in-depth look at what variables should be studied for regional climate change, GIS analysis of the suitability/benefits of using natural areas to monitor change, and ultimately to develop protocols/strategies to monitor change. This project is currently funded by BLM (primarily) and PNW. The group felt this was a good opportunity to capitalize on the collective knowledge of the committee (climate change initiatives, possible data sources, etc. that are used by each agency) and agreed to provide Maggie with ideas and suggestions as this project develops.

Action Item: Maggie will solicit ideas and input from the committee as the need arises.

(3) Forest Health and Restoration Treatments.

The following topics were discussed by the group:

From recent DNR news release on January 24, 2012, OLYMPIA – Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark today announced the new members of the Forest Health Technical Advisory Committee. In November 2011, Goldmark initiated the state's Forest Health Hazard Warning system, calling for formation of a technical committee of foresters, scientists, and other experts. The committee's charge is to advise Goldmark on the severity of the threats, areas of the state where corrective actions would be best prioritized, and what kind of actions would be most effective. Chaired by State Forester Aaron Everett, it is anticipated that the advisory committee recommendations will come in the spring so that timely action, including possible Forest Health Hazard Warnings or Orders, can be taken to protect eastern Washington forests. The number of acres damaged by forest insects and diseases in Washington over the past decade is 150 percent greater than it was in the 1990s, and 200 percent greater than in the 1980s.

From a recent Natural Area Program scoping meeting on the topics of forest health and restoration treatments for forested natural areas (that were previously managed timberlands) : The group discussion touched on differences between east/west, type of information available to the Natural Areas Program about our forested natural areas, DNR trust treatments for these reasons that also must make a profit, the cyclical nature of the health issues, how natural areas may or may not currently be used for monitoring these issues by DNR and others, research opportunities that may also include climate change topics, funding related to forest health/restoration projects, types of silvicultural activities related to forest health and restoration treatments (for species habitat).

(4) Interagency website

The current website <http://www.fsl.orst.edu/rna/index.htm> is limited in scope and content. Right now it includes only BLM and FS sites, and only basic descriptions of each. There are options for making it more useful and informative, including providing links to other agency natural areas websites, having more content associated with each site (e.g. electronic versions of guidebooks, science publications, searchable descriptors like veg or soil type, maps, establishment reports), posting materials of interagency interest (latest news, minutes from interagency meeting, strategic plan, agency projects of potential interagency interest, etc.), and it could serve as a web presence for natural areas for those agencies that otherwise do not have one. The committee agreed that work towards development of a more useful website was very important and could benefit the natural areas program of each individual agency.

Action Item: PNW will continue development of the website through OSU and will solicit input from members of the interagency group as it is created.

(5) Natural Areas Appreciation Day--review and 2012 options.

WA DNR has taken a lead role in this effort and wanted feedback on the success of this program over the last two years, and to discuss merits for continuing in the future. The interagency group decided to hold off this year on putting effort into holding a special day set aside for natural areas, given staff work loads. Instead, we will look into the costs and feasibility of putting together a 2013 PNW natural areas planner highlighting photos of agency natural areas, as a new way to promote the network both internally (within Agency) and externally. It may be possible to also have planners available for download on the interagency website.

Action Item: DNR will look into the process and costs associated with creating and printing planners through their communications staff and the state printer.

(6) Natural areas site visit(s) in 2012. The group was in favor of scheduling a field day in June to visit the South Sound Prairie Bog area (Gifford Pinchot NF) which has been proposed as a new Research Natural Area by the Seattle Native Plant Society. Currently, the area is designated as a Special Botanical Area. There is some concern about designating it as an RNA (past history of grazing, size) so this will be a good opportunity to discuss some of nuances around natural area designation in light of searches by each agency that are often for “the best of what’s left” for inclusion into the natural areas network.

Action Item: T. Wilson will coordinate the South Sound Prairie field trip details with the Mt. Adams Ranger District staff. Committee members may propose additional site visit opportunities as they arise.