Model BLM collaboration process tested by Pilot

by Luke Ruediger

The Pilot Joe timber sale above Cantrall-Buckley Park has been proposed as a model of forest management and community collaboration for the public lands of southwest Oregon. The goals of this project as defined by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) include fuel reduction, the restoration of complex forest conditions, the retention of old-growth trees, and the accelerated development of old-growth characteristics. The timber sale was touted as a restorative approach where timber production was a by-product of ecologically based treatments.

Unfortunately, the recent logging of large, old-growth trees has threatened to unravel the delicate collaborative process. Controversy revolves around the marking and removal of old-growth trees—some over 150 years old, as well as other large, dominant trees. The trees were cut despite the appeals of many collaborative members that they be retained. The removal of these trees is clearly inconsistent with dry forest restoration principals, the project's stated goals, the Environmental Assessment (EA), and the prescription as outlined by BLM staff at stakeholder meetings and public field trips.

Many of the trees removed had the structural conditions and fire resilience stated to be a part of the "desired future condition." Identified in the EA as "Ecosystem Restoration Goals," the retention of large, old trees would have helped to "increase the average diameter of the residual stand," and served to "accelerate the development of structural complexity such as large tree structures." Unfortunately, BLM's treatments have done otherwise and bring into question the agency's commitment to dry forest restoration principals, the first of which is to "protect and conserve all older trees (trees greater than 150 years of age)."

BLM will tell you that they cut only two old-growth trees, documented to be 182 and over 200 years old, and that these are only

Two large trees cut in the Pilot Joe timber sale. (Photo provided by Luke Ruediger.)

Two large Douglas firs marked to cut in the Pilot Joe timber sale. (Photo provided by Luke Ruediger.)

a small percentage of the project. They do admit, however, that other large trees should not have been cut and were inconsistent with project prescriptions.

Why is this important? Because so little of Oregon's old-growth remains, and old-growth trees are key components of healthy and fire resilient forests. Large old trees are important for spotted owl, Pacific fisher, and many other species. Also because BLM is proposing these pilots in older forests while claiming that old trees will be saved.

BLM pilots are seen as a solution for forests in western Oregon and beyond. With the goal of "maintenance of older trees," the pilot is sold as forest restoration, but it appears to be driven by industrial timber interests. Old trees have high ecological and social value, and have been the point of contention in federal land management for decades. In fact, BLM claims that the pilot projects were proposed to address "the gridlock and conflicts" that have "stymied" federal land management. Much of this conflict is directly related to the removal of old-growth trees. According to the EA, the ability of the agency to move forward "depends in part, on the social acceptability of restoration techniques." The protection of old-growth trees was proposed as a way to avoid this controversy while maintaining important ecological values.

Unfortunately, with the removal of many large, old trees, BLM has welcomed conflict and gridlock back into the debate. The agency has further inflamed the long-standing lack of trust between the BLM, local citizens, and the environmental community, by implementing treatments that lack environmental integrity and contradict statements made throughout the collaborative process. This lack of accountability does not foster a collaborative environment, nor does it help the collaborative move forward in a positive way. The entire point of collaboration is to move past long-standing issues, including a lack of accountability, responsibility, and trust.

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