



HARNEY COUNTY SNOW GEESSE/TYLER DUNGANNON

OHA challenges Ochoco OHV trail; project threatens key elk habitat

The Oregon Hunters Association (OHA), a nonprofit group of more than 10,000 hunters, has filed a lawsuit challenging the June 27 Record of Decision by the U.S. Forest Service to build an additional 137 miles of off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails on the Ochoco National Forest.

OHA's State Board of Directors, staff, and Central Oregon OHA chapters have opposed the Ochoco Summit Trail Project since it was proposed in 2009. OHA and others, including the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, have been fully engaged in the public process to oppose adding 137 miles of OHV trails and roads in critically important elk habitat.

The lawsuit filed by OHA states that the decision to approve this project is not supported by scientific wildlife research conducted by the Forest Service on the Starkey Experimental Forest in northeast Oregon. According to Jim Akenson, OHA conservation director, the project would add significant new road and trail use, which has been shown by the Forest Service's own scientists to have adverse impacts on elk habitat and security. Research on the Starkey Experimental Forest has found that elk avoid areas with 1.1 miles of roads or motorized trails.

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"This project would displace elk and force them from public to private lands, resulting in more damage complaints and fewer elk to pursue for the public land hunter." —Jim Akenson, Conservation Director for OHA

JIM WARD

OHA has filed suit to stop a U.S. Forest Service project to build 137 miles of new off-road vehicle trails in key elk habitat in the Ochoco Mountains.

resulting in more damage complaints and fewer elk to pursue for the public land hunter," Akenson said.

OHA filed a lawsuit in the Pendleton Division of the United States District Court for the District of Oregon. Scott Jerger, an attorney for OHA, explained that OHA's suit alleges that the Forest Service's decision violates the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

"OHA did everything they could to participate in the Forest Service planning process and raise their concerns about impacts on elk security and habitat," said Jerger. "The final decision by the Ochoco National Forest left OHA with no other option but to seek relief from the Court."

The Ochoco Mountains have historically been some of the best habitat for deer and elk in Oregon.

Information published on ODFW's website reveals that hunting contributes more than \$14 million to central Oregon's tourism economy and more than \$104 million to the statewide tourism economy on an annual basis.

"OHA filed this lawsuit as a last resort," said Paul Donheffner, OHA's Legislative Director. "We were very frustrated that despite the objections of ODFW, OHA and others, the Forest Service disregarded their own studies and plans to approve this project. This is not about off-road vehicles, which certainly have their place. This is all about protecting the Ochocos for elk."

OHA (www.oregonhunters.org) is the state's largest Oregon-based pro-hunting organization, with 10,000 members and 26 chapters statewide. Its mission is "Protecting Oregon's wildlife, habitat and hunting heritage."

Hunting regs, 2 carnivore plans, and revised turkey plan are up for approval

By Jim Akenson, Conservation Director

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission on Sept. 15 approved hunting regulations for the 2018 calendar year at their meeting in Welches. OHA has reviewed and commented on these regulations, which closely mirror the previous big game rules. There is still the possibility of emergency changes if we have another hard winter like this past one.

The Commission placed the Cougar Plan approval on the agenda for its

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opportunities for this species.

The Wolf Plan is the most controversial of the three plans under review and revision, but it too should be getting an adoption vote by the Commission later this fall, likely at the Dec. 8 meeting in Salem. OHA generally endorses this plan, but we are still pushing to see clearer language on the future of hunting as a tool in wolf population management. We feel this is a key part of normalizing this species – to be more similar to cougars and black bears in this state.

OHA has met with ODFW staff regarding the Turkey Plan. We have encouraged plan language that reveres this species and does not just emphasize damage control, but instead promotes this management concept, with: “The goal of Oregon’s turkey harvest management is to offer the greatest recreational opportunity while ensuring viable huntable populations into the future.”

Another regulation topic, still pending, is the simplification of Oregon’s hunting regulations. This will likely be implemented for 2019. OHA will actively participate in this process to ensure that our hunting heritage and hunting opportunities are protected into the foreseeable future. If you wish to send comments to the Commission, you should do so 10 days prior to the meeting at:

odfw.commission@coho2.dfw.state.or.us

New land-use issues arise

By Ken McCall, Resource Director



• **Baskett Slough:** The US Fish and Wildlife Service recently asked for comments on hunting and fishing proposals for 10 National Wildlife Refuges, including a youth waterfowl hunt at Baskett Slough NWR west of Salem. The comment deadline was Sept. 11. OHA noted the few site specific positive comments received prior to Sept. 5 were outnumbered by negative comments on the proposed hunt and included a strong element of anti-hunter rhetoric. A quick turnaround comment request directed to OHA members somewhat local to the area resulted in more than doubling the number of comments. The new comments specific to Baskett Slough NWR were heavily in favor of the youth hunt proposal. With negative comments going as far as demanding all hunters be banned from our public lands, our positive comments spoke to the safe, ethical, positive and responsible ways to introduce youth to our hunting heritage and responsible wildlife management. OHA thanks our members for their comments. OHA also submitted a letter in support from our state president. A decision is pending.

• **Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument:** The January 2017 expansion of the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument has come under reconsideration by the current administration as part of the national monument review process that ended in late August. Interior secretary Zinke recommended a reduction in size with no facts related to any specific proposal regarding size or management changes. Any action to scale back national monuments will likely be met with challenges in the courts and Congress. The State of Oregon is among the list of entities considering legal actions.

OHA is following the issue and will be involved in the process.

• **2017 Wildfires:** 2017 has brought another intense fire season to Oregon. The largest single fire in Oregon is Chetco Bar at about 180,000 acres to date. Part of the burn overlaps the Biscuit fire, a half-million acres blaze from 2002. Our land managers are looking for ways to reduce the size and severity of fires through management activities like prescribed burns, clearing thick fuels and thinning

dense stands of trees. Politicians have failed for years to avoid robbing the land managers of critical budgets to manage the landscape. Meanwhile environmental groups block any timber-related actions. The reality of these mega-burns is not all the vegetation is consumed, typically leaving a patchwork of green and blackened lands with returning forage created by default. Now is our time to weigh in on the landscape rehabilitation and wildlife habitat projects that follow the burns, pressure the politicians for a real financial fix and bring a voice of balance to the table.

OTHER ISSUE UPDATES



✓ Chesnimnus Elk Redistribution:

This program is in the second year of active monitoring to see how elk respond to hunting and other human activities. Both private and public lands have organized groups working on solutions, such as: adjust hunting regulations, increase hunter access onto private lands, and create a security corridor on public land to better hold elk.

✓ Metro Property Access:

OHA continues to meet with Metro user groups to advocate for hunting as a legitimate use of some Metro lands. We have been at the table making positive strides among the user groups participating in the code rules revision process.

✓ Elliott Forest Ownership:



The decision to keep the Elliott Forest public has been made and associated legislative action for bonding and allowing transfer to other agencies is in place. OHA’s next steps are engaging in the Elliott plans and looking toward OHA involvement in the remaining state managed lands east of the Cascades. Those mostly grazing lands are habitat for sage grouse and many other game species.

Hunting & Fishing Day proclaimed

Gov. Kate Brown on Aug. 31 proclaimed Sept. 23 to be National Hunting and Fishing Day, recognizing the “storied tradition of hunting and fishing.” the \$70 million sportsmen provide to support the conservation efforts of ODFW, and the \$929 million that 703,000 hunters and anglers contribute to the local economy, which accounts for at least 14,769 jobs.

—AL ELKINS, OHA LOBBYIST