



To the communities surrounding the Blue Mountains National Forests:

The Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) supports the USDA Forest Service's plans to reinstate Forest Plan Revision for the Malheur, Umatilla, and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests. The work completed by the BIC over the past two years has established key foundations that will be crucial components of an improved Forest Plan Revision process by reflecting local values, incorporating input, and providing robust opportunities for meaningful engagement.

On March 14, 2019, the Forest Service Deputy Chief issued instruction to the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Regional Forester to withdraw the Blue Mountains Revised Land Management Plans, Final Environmental Impact Statement and draft Record of Decision. This decision came after nearly 15 years of a highly contentious public planning process in which numerous community members and leaders felt frustrated, misunderstood, and ignored. The objection process yielded over 350 objections to the Forest Plans, which made clear that the public did not see how input provided had been incorporated nor did the plans fully account for the unique social and economic needs of the affected communities.

Following the withdrawal of the Blue Mountains Forest Plans, leadership from the Pacific Northwest Regional Office and the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests met with the Eastern Oregon Counties Association in April 2019, to coordinate, better understand concerns, and identify opportunities to approach forest planning and management in a new way. The participants recognized the need to explore unique approaches and work together at a larger scale, which included other government entities within and surrounding the Blue Mountains geographic area.

The various government entities officially formed the Blues Intergovernmental Council (BIC) in November 2019, to serve as an overarching entity and develop joint recommendations on the most contentious issues identified in the Blue Mountains Forest Plan Revision process. The BIC members include leaders from all 14 local counties, as well as federal, state, and tribal government entities. The diverse membership of the BIC ensures numerous perspectives and interests are represented.

Over the two years since the BIC formed, members worked together to develop desired conditions for Forest Service consideration on several key and previously polarizing issues in the withdrawn Blue Mountains Forest Plans, including riparian livestock grazing, fisheries, hydrology, forest health, and access. The BIC also commissioned and oversaw the completion of a socioeconomic analysis that will offer data to help consider impacts of forest management decisions to local communities.

The BIC-endorsed desired conditions serve as recommendations to the Forest Service to inform the Forest Plan Revision process (with a minority report included for the access issue). The collective work over the past two years has fostered trust and strengthened relationships between the key intergovernmental groups within the BIC and the Forest Service.

The BIC members and leadership from the Blue Mountains National Forests feel this unique approach will provide a crucial foundation for success in accomplishing Forest Plan Revision for the Blue Mountains in a timely manner. By building off the past plan revision analysis, the BIC's endorsed desired

conditions products, and connections that each member has with various community perspectives, we have an exceptional opportunity to develop updated Forest Plans for these National Forests that provide for the sustainable needs of the landscape and the needs of current and future generations.

Building off these accomplishments, the BIC believes that the Forest Service should move forward with the plan revision process under the 2012 Planning Rule, with the goal of working together to develop sustainable Forest Plans that reflect local values, incorporate input, and provide robust opportunities for meaningful engagement. We support the Forest Service's plan to establish a local team and would urge this be done as quickly as possible to maintain the forward momentum the BIC has achieved in these last two years. By working together through this intergovernmental forum, the BIC can serve as a bridge between the Forest Service and communities surrounding the Blue Mountains to help repair and build trust, provide clarity about the planning process and plan components, complement Forest Service public outreach efforts, and bring continual feedback to the Forest Service regarding ways to improve the process or products.

While there will still be passion around important issues, we feel that through the joint efforts between the BIC and the Forest Service we have built important relationships and developed key recommendations that address much of the previous controversy. This has built a solid foundation to move forward now with Plan Revision.

Thank you for the consideration and recognition of the vast progress that has been made in the Blue Mountains. We look forward to working together with the Forest Service to steward these National Forest lands in a way that provides for sustainable land management while considering the communities' economic and social-cultural health.

Sincerely,

Susan Roberts, Co-Convener

On behalf of the Blues Intergovernmental Council

BIC website: <https://bit.ly/3O2vUID>