

September 23, 2019

Glenn Casamassa
Pacific Northwest Region
Forest Service
1220 SW 3rd Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97204

RE: Request for the U.S. Forest Service to Resume Revision of Land Management Plans and Travel Management Plans in Northeast Oregon.

On behalf of the undersigned organizations representing sportsmen and women within Oregon and throughout the country, we write to encourage the Forest Service to begin strategic, locally relevant, and sensible Travel Management Plans (TMPs) on the Malheur and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests and to resume the planning process for the existing land management plans. These two National Forests are among the last forests within the National Forest System that have yet to create a TMP since the Travel Management Rule was created in 2005.

A travel management process was to follow the anticipated release of the Record of Decision for the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman, and Malheur National Forests Revised Land Management Plans (Blue Mountains ROD). Travel management planning on these forests would provide opportunities for local input to help craft strategic and functional plans that ensure continued access for the public, allow for active forest management, and promote wildlife abundance. Unfortunately, in March of this year, the U.S. Forest Service announced their decision to withdraw the three revised plans that stakeholders have labored over since the early 2000s. This withdrawal will further delay the implementation of new science and the management of nearly 5.5 million acres of public lands. We urge the Forest Service to re-start the land management planning process and complete the travel management that was to follow.

Elk are highly important throughout the communities in Northeastern Oregon for their ecological, economic, and cultural values. The proper management of critical spring, summer, and fall ranges through limited restrictions on motorized access is essential to restoring appropriate seasonal distribution across these forests and adjacent private lands. Private farm and ranch lands provide irreplaceable habitat for elk which often spend a portion of the winter relying on these productive private lands. In certain areas on these forests, the high density of roads and increasing disturbance by motor vehicles has changed the behavior of the elk herds. This disturbance moves elk onto private lands for longer periods of time and results in unsustainable levels of damage to neighboring farms and ranches. For the Forest Service to remain a good neighbor and maintain key partnerships with private landowners, it is important to manage habitat in a way that will restore the appropriate seasonal distribution of elk and other big game to alleviate the damage to these private lands.

The Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests offer the best elk hunting and viewing found in Oregon, which generates millions of dollars annually for the local economies. Most of these hunters rely on the public lands managed by the Forest Service for their hunting opportunities. Furthermore, several

Native American tribes rely on these public lands to harvest elk as a “first food”, which is a reserved treaty right. Additionally, elk are the primary prey base for the growing population of wolves in Oregon. Maintaining abundant elk populations on public lands helps to reduce livestock depredations and conflicts from this growing wolf population.

Finally, we would like to highlight that this administration has made sportsmen’s issues and conservation of wildlife corridors a core part of their agenda. Consideration of important wildlife corridors and motorized disturbance levels on winter and summer range through travel management would benefit elk and other big game. It is critical these public lands are managed in a way that provides for quality elk habitat that offers security and productive forage. A strategic, locally crafted TMP, tiered off of an updated forest plan, is one important step to (a) ensure continued elk hunting and viewing opportunities for the public, (b) ensure that elk are available to meet the obligation to reserved tribal treaty rights, (c) reduce rising conflicts from elk damage caused from overuse and poor distribution on private lands, (d) maintain a healthy prey base of elk on public lands to reduce wolf related livestock depredations, and (e) limit disturbance to big game on critical winter and summer range.

We acknowledge the complexity involved to craft the right balance of multiple use on these forests but finding that balance is too important to postpone. We again urge the Forest Service to re-start the land management planning process and complete the travel management that was to follow. We would like to request a meeting with other sportsmen groups and your office to learn more about these forest plans when you are available. We look forward to working with you during these planning processes to determine the best path forward for the management of these important public lands and the abundant wildlife they support.

Sincerely,

Michael O’Casey
Oregon Field Representative
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Nic Callero
Oregon Chapter Policy Director
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers

