

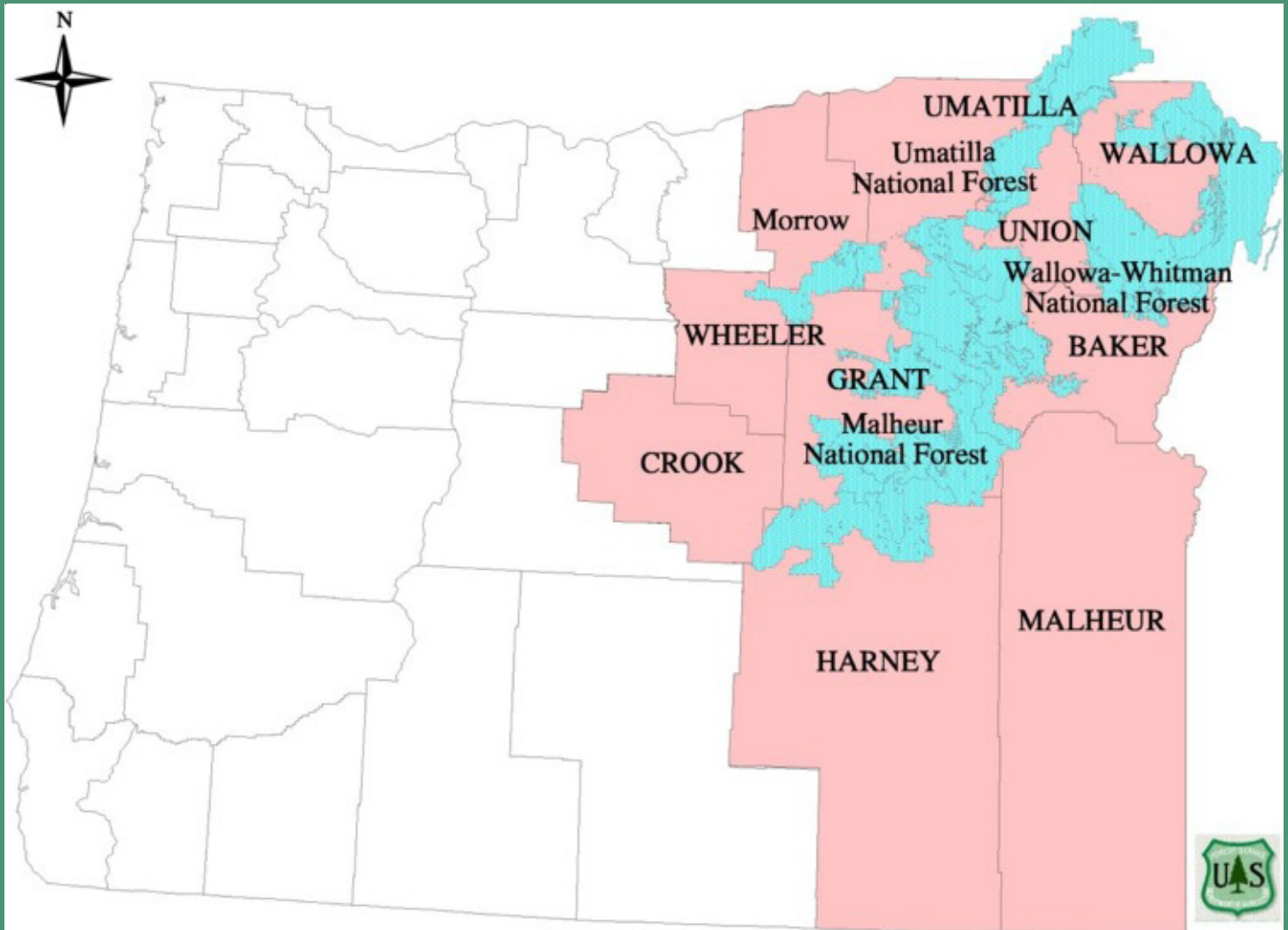
# SUPPORTING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES AND FORESTS



## THE NORTHEAST OREGON FORESTS RESOURCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE



# The Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee Quick Facts and Figures



*The Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee covers a ten county region and the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests.*

Total Area Covered: 40,897 sq. miles

National Forest Acreage: 5,252,508 acres

Number of Committee Members: 15 with 3 alternates

Potential Funds Available Annually to Distribute: \$2,042,641

Amount of Project Funding Approved (FY2002 and FY2003): \$3,423,305\*

Contract Dollars Awarded: \$575,145 \*

*\* Estimates as of February 2003*

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the federal government began taking back private land into their ownership, with measures such as the integration of Forest Service Lands in 1907. In response, the U.S. Congress recognized that counties would be losing a significant amount of potential revenue with a reduction in private land ownership. Hence the creation in 1908 of a law that



provided counties with a portion of profits from federal timber extraction. These funds gave counties a substantial income for schools and road maintenance.

Throughout the years, counties and timber harvesting grew together, but the codependent relationship began to erode beginning in the 1980s. An increased awareness about the need for sustainable forestry forced a decline in forest harvesting on federal lands. Counties watched with the timber industry as profits from federal forests dwindled to almost nothing.

Relief came in 1993 with the *Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act* (PL 103-66), which gave 72 counties in Washington, California, and Oregon a safety net payment, but only until the end of the fiscal year 2003. Determined to support these needy counties, Senators Ron Wyden of Oregon and Larry Craig of Idaho wrote the *Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000* (PL 106-393). The act, which is effective 2001-2006, promises

to help relieve the economic burden that rural counties face by giving them the option of receiving an annual payment equal to the average of their three highest timber payments from 1986-1999 instead of the traditional timber revenue payment.

As historically was done, individual counties retain most of these funds and direct them largely to schools or road departments. However, 15-20% of these county funds are made available for the support of projects that benefit public lands. Commonly known as Title II funds and distributed under the direction of a resource advisory committee, this portion of the act funds projects that

- **maintain or obliterate roads**
- **improve watershed conditions**
- **aid forest ecosystem health**
- **help maintain vital habitat for fish and other threatened species**
- **control noxious weeds and reestablish native plant species**

# The Committee

## Committee Structure and Formation

Each county that sets aside money for Title II projects must work with the designated U.S.D.A. Forest Service Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) for their region. In order to gain approval for Title II projects, applicants from each county must submit their proposal to the RAC. Since 1972, when the Federal Advisory Committee Act was enacted, committees of many shapes and sizes have had an impact on the decisions made by the federal government in all different fields. With Title II funds, each RAC plays a vital role in determining what sort of projects will be funded and to what extent they will be financed. All projects must be submitted to and approved by the RAC before they can be sent on to the Secretary of Agriculture for final approval.

Within Oregon, there are seven U.S.D.A. Forest Service Resource Advisory Committees. The Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee (NEOFRAC), formed in 2002, covers the largest portion of Oregon, spanning ten counties and three expansive national forests, or in geographic terms, the eastern half of the state. As a result, committee members represent each corner of this area, from Burns in the south to Enterprise in the north. And the diversity in representation does not stop there. The *Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act* requires that each RAC contain five representatives from the following three categories:

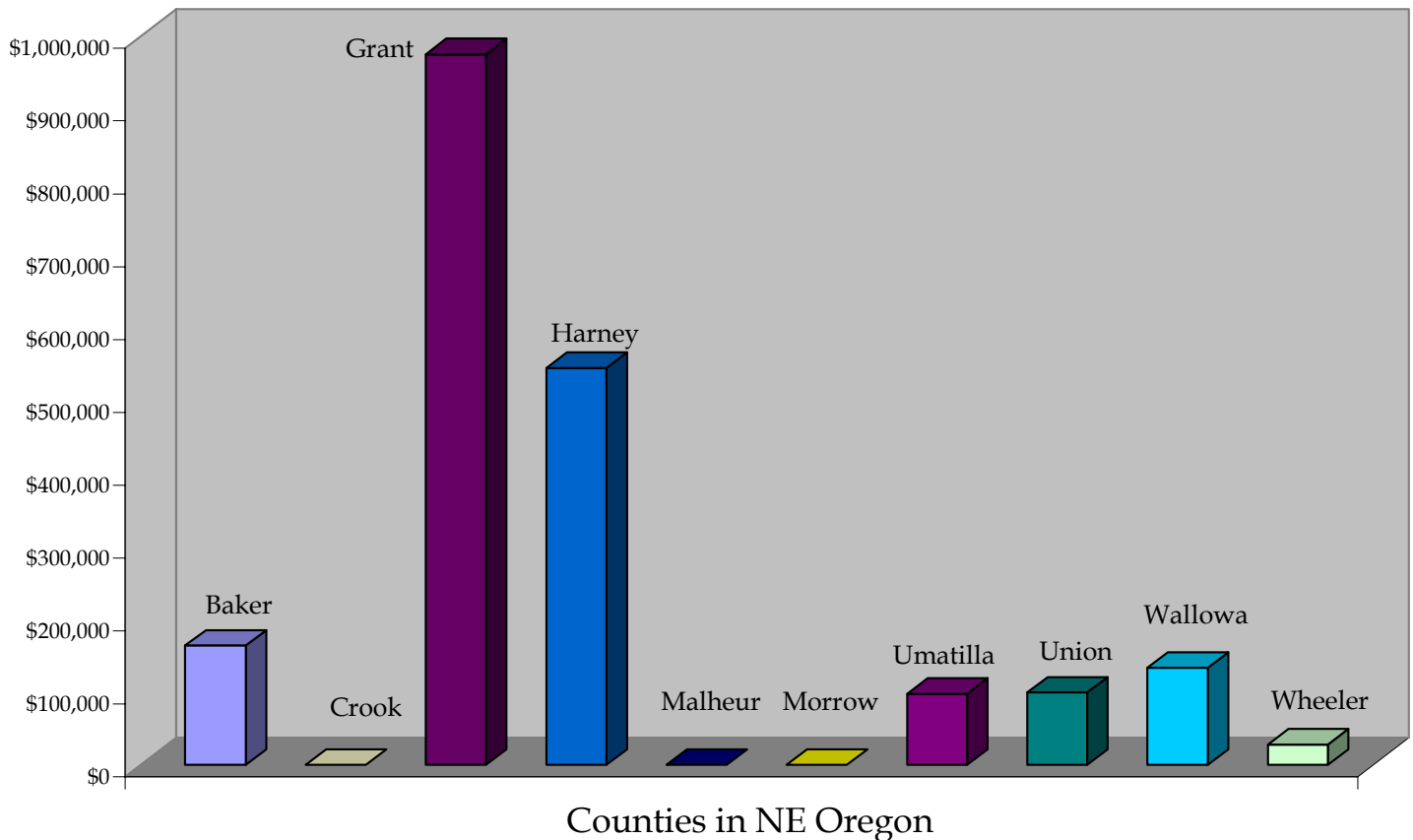
- **Category 1: representatives from organized labor, commercial or off-road recreation, extraction interests, the timber industry, or with federal grazing or land-use permits.**
- **Category 2: individuals that represent recognized environmental organizations, dispersed recreation, archaeological and historical interests, or recognized wild horse and burro groups.**
- **Category 3: those who hold state or local elected office, represent American Indian tribes within or adjacent to the relevant area, are school officials or teachers, or represent the affected public at large.**



*Committee members examine a protective plant structure during a site visit.*

Under these requirements, the Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee was formed. The application process was open to citizens throughout the eastern Oregon region and members were ultimately chosen by county commissioners and the regional forester from Region 6 of the Forest Service. The consequent group

## Title II Funds Available in NE Oregon Counties



\* Crook County is under two RACs and contributed its Title II funds to the Deschutes/Ochoco RAC; Malheur County received less than \$100,000 under the act and is not required to designate Title II Funds; Morrow County designated its 15% all to Title III funds (Special County Projects), as allowed under the act.

contains representatives from several fields, including mineral extraction, ranching, archaeology, tribal interests, biology, environmental concerns, and public office.

Although some might expect a group with such varied backgrounds to struggle in making decisions, the NEOFAC emphasized from the beginning the importance of collaboration between members. The committee aims to reach consensus whenever possible before voting. In the situation where group consensus is unattainable, a decision is met with a majority vote within each of the three categories, which allows each category to play a crucial role. However, most decisions have been met by consensus, and many believe the NEOFAC has been more successful as a result; contentious issues are thoroughly examined from many viewpoints, and although each person retains their own opinion, they can also gain a broader perspective in general.

During fiscal year 2002, the NEOFAC was able to approve \$1,786,884 and \$1,636,421 in fiscal year 2003 for Title II projects. This amounts to more than three million dollars worth of restoration and maintenance efforts that otherwise would not occur. The committee stresses funding projects that support immediate on-the-ground efforts, materials, and labor that will have a lasting impact. This common vision causes the NEOFAC to overcome small differences and to compromise when necessary in order to set projects in motion.

# The People

## **Mark Smith, Contractor Burns, Oregon Culvert Inventory Project**

Mark Smith has dabbled in a little bit of everything. In his 19 years in Harney County, he has worked in everything from farm finance to cabinetry. But after he was laid off from the Louisiana Pacific mill in Burns, Smith was forced to look for new options to supplement his income. He then became interested in a retraining program run by the Malheur National Forest, which provided residents in Harney and Grant Counties the chance to gain experience and become competitive in the Forest Service contracting market. The government agency now employs “best value contracting” and under this requirement, contractors must have previous experience working on similar projects before being awarded a contract. However, without actually receiving a contract, it is difficult to gain this experience. The retraining program allowed willing local residents the chance to overcome this obstacle.



The program ran from April to November 2001, and Smith and his fellow trainees worked on projects ranging from seed orchard maintenance, culvert surveys, stand exams, and fence repair and received guidance on contract bidding and writing. Although some trainees had prior experience, the Forest Service program gave them the ability to list a wide range of skills on their resumes. After the program was finished, the participants then had the chance to complete their contracting license and pesticide applicator’s license, an opportunity that Smith gladly took up.

After finishing the retraining program, Smith was then able to use the culvert survey skills he obtained to bid on and receive a Title II contract through the Forest Service. The survey involved studying existing culverts in Grant County, mostly on the South Fork of the John Day River, to see if they allowed adequate fish passage.

Once the Forest Service has completed their portion of culvert surveys, they can combine the results with similar studies done by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. A complete picture of the culvert situation will allow the two agencies and other organizations to prioritize improvements that will ultimately help fish species such as summer steelhead and redband trout in the John Day River Basin.



*Smith at work on culvert surveys in Grant County*

Smith believes that the retraining process and the Title II projects are both valuable additions to the local economy. “You put out a half a million in contracts and by the time that money floats around the community three or four times, it’s had an impact. It’s just one more cog in the wheel. It’s not the answer to our economic situation but it’s a part of it.” As Title II projects become established, more and more local contractors can develop the necessary skills for best value contracting and be awarded more contracts in turn.

# The Projects

So far the NEOFAC has already approved 65 major projects throughout the eastern Oregon region. In order to gain the committee's approval, each project must adequately lay out the financial and ecological details and include a plan to monitor the impacts on both the forests and communities. Most projects have been sponsored by the Forest Service. The federal agency has many projects that have passed through the necessary environmental regulations but often lacks the adequate funds to implement them. Projects may also be sponsored by other entities, and the committee hopes to see more diverse sponsors as the *Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act* continues in the upcoming years.

## ***Olmstead Visuals Project*** **Malheur National Forest** **69 forested acres of thinning and fuel reduction** **Title II Contribution: \$51,196**



*A section of the Olmstead Visual project, above before the thinning treatment and below after the stand had been thinned.*



On this forested 69 acres, there was a thick mixture of conifers, which included white fir, lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and western larch. The crowded stands left the timber vulnerable to insect infestation and at risk for extreme fires. The Olmstead Visuals Project was part of a larger undertaking called the Dry Analysis area, which involved regeneration and thinning activities, fuel treatment to reduce the risk of fire, and designation of vital habitat for wildlife.

In order to achieve a forest ecosystem less susceptible to fire and insects, project managers aimed to retain key species, including all hardwoods like willows and alders, and large conifers such as ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. All downed trees greater than 12" in diameter were also retained for wildlife habitat. After the trees had been thinned, the excess slash was chipped and removed to reduce the risk of major fires. With the thinning project complete, fire can now resume a more natural role within the stands.

The project also led to an important economic input with a \$27,600 contract awarded to a local business. The Eastern Oregon region has historically been dependent on logging, and any sustainable logging efforts offer a much needed financial boost to the area.

***Umatilla Weed Treatment and Survey***  
**Umatilla National Forest**  
**1,320 acres surveyed and treated**  
**Title II Contribution: \$25,000/year**

Noxious weeds, or rather non-native plant species, are becoming more and more invasive and threatening throughout the western landscape. The Umatilla National Forest is certainly no exception. In this particular national forest, weeds can be devastating to wildlife and livestock forage and a deterrent to recreation and tourism, which are important mainstays of the local economy.

Working with private landowners and the county weed agency, the Forest Service has identified and treated as many sites of noxious weed invasion as possible. Throughout the Umatilla National Forest, many large patches of weeds have already been pinpointed, but others remain undiscovered to biologists. This multi-year project allows for the identification of significant sites and the consequent treatment of the weeds with either manual removal or spot spraying with approved pesticides. Once treated, each site is then replanted with a native sheep fescue grass seed, allowing the area to eventually return to a more balanced ecological state.



*This patch of Scotch Thistle is particularly menacing.*



*This seemingly inviting field of wildflowers is actually a recently identified patch of the noxious weed Sulfur Cinquefoil.*



**Swamp Creek Watershed Restoration Project**  
**Wallowa-Whitman National Forest**  
**8.0 miles of riparian fencing built**  
**15 acres of native plants seeded**  
**Title II Contribution: \$25,000/year**

Watershed restoration projects require multiple tasks and consequently well-planned coordination between partners. The Swamp Creek Watershed Restoration Project, covering a twelve mile reach of Swamp Creek, is an apt example of the complexity of a restoration project, and also shows the success that can be reached if partners work together.

The project, directed by the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, falls under the wider scope of the Lower Joseph Creek Watershed Restoration, a multi-agency, long-term effort to revitalize the watershed. Project partners are many, but include such participants as the Grande Ronde Model Watershed Program, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Wallowa Resources, a local nonprofit organization. The Swamp Creek and Lower Joseph Creek Watershed Restoration Projects are just two of the many collaborative stream restoration efforts ongoing on the Wallowa-Whitman Forest and the surrounding land. Forest managers hope their careful piece-by-piece planning will lead to the improved health of the entire forest and its watersheds.



*Above, a stretch of Swamp Creek before restoration. Below, the same stretch after native plants with protective fencing were planted. It will take several years before the plants fully establish themselves.*



In this particular project, the focus was to help the plant community return to its native hardwood and shrub condition. Along with this goal, project managers also built eight miles of riparian fencing to protect streambanks while allowing for continued multiple uses in the area.

By completing this small piece of the puzzle, natural resource managers can move on to other sections of the Lower Joseph Creek Watershed and continue to work together to improve overall watershed health. This process, although lengthy, allows for an integrated and complete approach to improved stream and forest ecosystems and viable habitat for many of its inhabitants.



*A close-up of some of the fenced-in young native plants*

# The Future

The *Secure Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000* provides funding through fiscal year 2006. This gives the Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee approximately five years to oversee and fund a potential \$10,213,205 in areas such as watershed restoration, road maintenance and obliteration, forest ecosystem improvements, noxious weed eradication, and native species promotion. And the impact goes beyond solely supporting Title II projects. Many projects involve other entities and lead to the continued support of emerging efforts such as native plant seed banks or ongoing stream restoration for future years.

The positive impact is also carried to the people involved in the RAC. In few other arenas do individuals such as a rancher, an established environmentalist and a county judge come together to work on tangible projects in a constructive yet candid environment. Within the RAC, the members have the opportunity to share opinions, for better or worse, and work together on issues relevant to their region, to their forests and watersheds, and to their fellow citizens.

The Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee has only been active for just over a year, yet the impact of approved projects and dollars has already been seen. Within the next several years, the committee, project sponsors, and the communities all have the chance to grow together. The diversity of projects can flourish and local contractors and employees can gain further experience. More importantly, the public can benefit from the environmental and economic benefits of the act in addition to the other educational and infrastructure improvements that the act contributes to the region. Timber harvests may have slowed, but as we work to create sustainable forests, we also can work toward sustainable communities.



*Printed February 2003*  
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Produced under the direction of the  
Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee  
and in cooperation with  
Harney County and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service