FFAC OLD Growth thoughts to consider from Steve Grasty after conversation with many in Harney County and the eastside of Oregon.

The FS has over a hundred different definitions of old growth. I don't think we can reasonably expect consensus around a "standard" definition in our lifetime nor should we necessarily want one. We have to continue to focus on what's best for the landscape based upon what's present and what the desired condition is desired to be.

One of my concerns as we address "old growth" is what has already begun in the emails. The "I" know best syndrome, the "my" science is best idea. This committee needs to remember that we are attempting to recommend policy for this state regarding the management of national forestlands contained herein. With that idea in mind I also want to remind us that we are talking about a vastly different and varying landscape with many species present. Broadly we are trying to recommend policy on the dry pine forests, the "wet" side fir forests and juniper stands. No single policy will work for all three of those broad designations.

Even more complicating if you take just Harney County you have federal forestlands (as this committee describes them) ranging in elevation from under 3000 feet to nearly 7000 feet. We have riparian areas that go completely dry for several months EVERY year and riparian areas that are soaking wet all year EVERY year. We have heavily forested hillsides on one side of a canyon and no trees on the opposite. We have healthy stands of large trees and we have heavily overgrown stands of big trees. We have areas with many fir trees, some of them quite large, where firs would not have historically been. We have areas which need active management to occur on them and areas that don't. And, so far these arguments are only about the pine forests in this county. The arguments are just as complicated when we begin to talk about juniper management.

This committee needs to respect the fact that the above arguments get dramatically worse as we expand their implication on a statewide basis. Simply stated there is no single policy which will work in a variety of areas on each single site, each single forest or statewide. The only solution is one which can develop trust amongst all and allow for flexibility of management to happen site by site.

I worry that this committee will recommend a "standard" definition based on diameter or age. The result of using that argument over the last couple of decades has been devastating to rural Oregon. In most of the conversations we have had to this date we have discussed what our desired outcome is, let's not let this conversation become one of protection of a big tree but rather let it be one on the desired outcome in an eco-system. It was pointed out to me last week that while a large ponderosa pine may be fire tolerant, the stand of trees that it is contained in (that local eco-system) may not be, due to fuel loading or other causes. Some of the folks in our state demand clean water and healthy forests through protection from management or harvesting. A worst case example of how unsuccessful for clean water and healthy forests the complete protection of old growth is would be the 15,000 acres (of never entered old growth) burnt in Grant County. Active management on that site could have prevented that disaster.

The health of much of our forests is embarrassingly poor. In many cases our state's rural communities the culture has been reduced to one of shrinking populations, drug use, abusive relationships and general apathy where it was once thriving. Many of our community's economy have been eliminated. And, as I continue to argue this kind of "standard" policy has dramatically contributed to what is either an intentional or unintentional yet successful effort to de-populate rural Oregon. We need an old growth policy recommendation that results in healthy forests and healthy communities as a desired outcome.

A final thought to add to our conversation is one from wikipedia. "Ancient Woodland" is a term used in the United Kingdom to refer specifically to woodland dating back to 1600 or before (in England and Wales), or 1750 (in Scotland). Before this, planting of new woodland was uncommon, so a wood present at these dates was likely to have developed naturally. By this definition Ancient Woodland may have had considerable artificial interference, the important characteristic being continuity of woodland on the land.

By contrast, in the US, "old growth" is often used to imply a forest has experienced little direct disruption during contemporary historical epochs and looks about as it would had Europeans not come to America. This criterion is difficult to apply, since it is often impossible to determine the history of human management (Euro-American or Native American). And, since landscapes are naturally dynamic, there can be no certainty what forests would look like now had pre-Columbian regimes been uninterrupted. While it is generally agreed that old forests defined as "old growth" have not been subject to logging, the role of natural disturbances in defining old growth is more ambiguous. Some definitions, for example, exclude recently burned forests, even where fire has been part of the natural dynamics for millennia; in other cases, such natural disturbance is incorporated in the old growth concept. However, it is often difficult to distinguish the ecological effects of natural disruption from human-caused disruption. Finally, even forests that have never experienced direct manipulation by Euro-Americans have been subjected to indirect effects in the form of invasive species, climate change, and regional modifications of ecological disturbance regimes (e.g., fire suppression).