

THE SISKIYOU MOUNTAIN ADVOCATE

The BLM's secret logging plans in the Applegate Valley

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

In recent years, the Medford District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has become increasingly secretive and nontransparent. Rather than address public concerns or opposition to old-forest logging proposals, the agency has insulated itself from critique by expediting the planning process, eliminating all avenues for meaningful public input, and refusing to implement site-specific scientific analysis or a creditable environmental review process. This means that the BLM no longer notifies the public of its logging plans until they are “finalized” and does not incorporate public concerns into the planning process.

For many years the BLM has worked to circumvent its obligation to the public and the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process while pushing for increased timber production throughout western Oregon. In our region, this began to intensify in 2016 when the agency eliminated the Applegate Adaptive Management Area, a designation specifically meant to encourage open, transparent planning processes and public collaboration. Unfortunately, this has now culminated with the IVM (Integrated Vegetation Management) Project, and public involvement is now fully discretionary on over 630,000 acres of BLM land in southwestern Oregon.

The Medford District BLM recently published its 2023 Timber Sale Plan identifying commercial logging projects the agency intends to implement during the next year. On this list are four major timber sales in the Applegate River watershed, totaling 1,674 acres and

an estimated 13.7 million board feet of timber. These projects are proposed throughout the watershed—on Sterling Creek, in the Middle Applegate, and on Williams Creek, where two large timber sales are currently proposed. Although these timber sales contain a wide variety of habitat types and forest conditions, they share one thing in common: a distinct lack of meaningful public involvement and a total lack of credible scientific analysis or environmental review.

My recent articles have discussed both the Late Mungers and Penn Butte Timber Sales between Williams and Murphy in the western portion of the Applegate Valley. Now the BLM has proposed two more timber sales in our valley, both of which will include little to no public involvement.

The Late Mungers, Penn Butte, and Big Ben LSR (Late Successional Reserve) timber sales are proposed for implementation under the provisions of the IVM Project. In these areas, the BLM has authorized a “program of work” which would log up to 20,000 acres and build up to 90 miles of new road in the next ten years, and the agency has begun implementing the IVM Project exclusively in the Applegate River watershed.

Currently very little is known about the Big Ben LSR Timber Sale, and the BLM is refusing to provide information on this sale to either the public or elected officials. Working totally in the dark, the agency has refused to provide basic information on the location of timber sale units and is designing yet another Applegate Valley timber sale in secret, with no public accountability or input.



Hikers stand in a grove of trees proposed for logging in the Penn Butte Timber Sale above Williams, Oregon. Every large tree in this photograph is proposed for removal in a “group selection” harvest. Like other timber sales currently proposed by the BLM in the Applegate Valley, the Penn Butte Timber Sale was developed without the benefit of meaningful public involvement. Photo: Luke Ruediger.

Despite repeated requests for information, the BLM is claiming that no information can be made available, yet a September 2023 auction date has been proposed for 700 acres of logging units and 3.5 million board feet of timber. With an auction date in less than a year, clearly more is known than the BLM will share. To date, all we have been told is that “the project will be roughly located south of Applegate and Ruch, bounded by the Applegate River and Thompson Creek.”

Although not proposed for implementation under the IVM Project, the Lower Sterling Mortality Salvage Timber Sale, including units along the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail, has been proposed for auction by the BLM without any public comment or involvement. The newly released Categorical Exclusion and Decision Record identifies 182 acres

proposed for logging, up to 1.1 million board feet proposed for removal, and no public comment period.

In the Applegate Valley, we hear a lot from our public land managers and elected officials about collaborative forest management, while at the same time we watch the BLM erode the process, eliminate all avenues for meaningful public collaboration, and operate in secrecy. Open access to information is the foundation of collaboration, and the BLM is consistently refusing to provide basic information on timber projects affecting the communities and watersheds of the Applegate Valley. While we work towards meaningful dialogue and sound environmental stewardship, the BLM continues in the opposite direction.

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