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The Crooked River Watershed Council has funding available to install fish screens on irrigation pumps throughout the lower Crooked River, and along Ochoco and McKay creeks.

It's projected that fish screens will be federally required by 2024 throughout the Crooked River, likely at the landowner's expense, to protect young salmon and steelhead under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).



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Other side of Lemon Gulch controversy

• Darlene Henderson May 17 2022

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Ochoco Trails refutes much of the recent claims opponents of the trail system have made

The proposed mountain biking trails at Lemon Gulch have become the center of controversy here in Prineville. Lemon Gulch is just one part of a comprehensive trail plan that the Ochoco Trails coalition proposed to the Ochoco National Forest. That plan is a "wish list" of trail ideas to improve recreational opportunities for hikers, horseback riders and mountain bike riders while protecting wildlife and other natural resources.

Who Is Ochoco Trails?

Ochoco Trails is a community-based coalition of non-motorized trail users. We were brought together in 2017 by the Prineville-Crook County Chamber of Commerce to help the Forest Service address the increasing demand for recreation on the Ochoco National Forest and the Crooked River National Grassland. We are not a mountain biking group, as we have been characterized in the Central Oregon lately. Instead, we are a broad coalition of people who envision sustainable non-motorized trails on the Ochocos and Grassland. We want to make Crook County a more attractive place to live and work, allow our residents to reap the health benefits of outdoor recreation and protect wildlife habitat and natural resources for future generations.

Participants in Ochoco Trails' development of a trail proposal for the Ochoco National Forest included representatives of Oregon Equestrian Trails, Back County Horsemen, the Crook County Chapter of Central Oregon Trail Alliance, the Oregon Hunters' Association, Oregon Wild, an individual rancher and grazing permittee, hikers and the Chamber of Commerce. In addition, the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife offered natural resource-related feedback on our discussions.

We started our collaboration by examining the existing non-motorized trails in the Ochoco National Forest. We realized that the existing trail supply does not meet the current demand. Given its size, the Forest has relatively few trails. In addition, many of the existing trails are located far from Prineville, and a number of the trails were created by pack trains to carry supplies to mine sites, so they don't offer an enjoyable trail experience.

Consequently, most trail use in the Ochocos is concentrated on a few very popular trails.

After several years of collaboration, Ochoco Trails developed a plan for an expanded set of non-motorized trails to provide the types of experiences various trail users desire. Our proposal included some trails open to all non-motorized users, plus other trails for hikers only, hikers and horses and mountain bikes and hikers. The protection of wildlife habitats was a top priority in our recommended locations for trails.

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Many candidate areas were considered and discarded because of wildlife, fishery or natural resource concerns. The idea of widespread use of old decommissioned forest roads was also discarded because dispersed recreation over a wide area has a substantial impact on wildlife.

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Ochoco Trails has been incorrectly criticized for not working with local officials to develop the plan. We attended the Crook County Court work session on Jan. 6, 2018, to introduce ourselves and share our proposal. In addition, we attended the May 8, 2019 Crook County Natural Resource Advisory Committee meeting to solicit their input on our proposal and invite them to collaborate with us. At that time, they expressed polite interest in our conceptual trails plan, but we had no takers from the Natural Resource Committee on our invitation to collaborate. And as the April 13, 2021 County Court meeting minutes reflect, Judge Crawford stated he had been involved in Lemon Gulch project for many years.

We also had a public meeting on Sept. 20, 2018, to gather feedback about the trail plan. We publicized the meeting using social media, flyers and the local newspaper. Additionally, the Forest Service notified everyone on their mailing list of this public meeting. All types of recreational trail users attended, along with local ranchers and business community representatives. The input we received was overwhelmingly positive, except for four attendees who objected to developing any new trails in the Forest.

The Forest Service has also provided regular updates to both County Court and the Natural Resources Committee. In particular, on March 4, 2020, the County Court received a briefing paper that included Ochoco Trails' 100-mile non-motorized trail proposal, and the Natural Resources Committee received updates on the Lemon Gulch trail proposal on March 10, 2021 and April 14, 2021.

It's important to note that the Forest Service has not given blanket approval to Ochoco Trails' comprehensive proposal. Instead, they are evaluating each of the plan's components individually. So far, the agency has approved several new improvements in the Allen Creek Horse Camp trail complex and the Bandit Springs multi-use trails. Other trail concepts they are currently evaluating include the equestrian bypass on the Lookout Mountain trail and the Corral Flat equestrian endurance trail complex. In addition, the Forest Service is still working on their thorough analysis of the Lemon Gulch trail proposal, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act. It's also important to note that while the Lemon Gulch trails are specifically designed for mountain bike riders, they will also be open to hikers.

The Lemon Gulch proposal calls for various trails providing close-to-town trails for beginners and families, as well as intermediate, advanced and physically challenged riders. However, to protect the deer and elk that use the Lemon Gulch area for their winter range, the trails will be open only from May 1 to Nov. 30.

If you'd like more information about Ochoco Trails' entire trail proposal for the Ochoco National Forest, please visit our website at www.ochocotrails.org (<http://www.ochocotrails.org>). And if you'd like to learn more about projects the Ochoco National Forest is currently analyzing, you can sign up at www.fs.usda.gov/main/ochoco/landmanagement/projects (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/ochoco/landmanagement/projects>) to receive updates on all projects.

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