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Forest program seeks funds to continue thinning efforts

Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project hopes to tap federal farm bill

The collaborative group behind a forest restoration program that helped Deschutes County firefighters corral wildfire has applied to Congress for additional funding for another five years.

The Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project, which was originally intended to expire at the end of this year, is looking to tap funds included in the 2018 farm bill, passed by Congress at the end of last year. Jean Nelson-Dean, public affairs officer for the Deschutes National Forest, said the project submitted a request for funds last week.

The collaborative project has been instrumental in helping to coordinate efforts by the Deschutes National Forest to thin areas of forest that had become tinderboxes after years of fire suppression efforts allowed growth to go unchecked.

“It has been an extremely successful project,” said Nelson-Dean. “It has been good for the forests that everyone loves around here. We are hoping to do some more good work with the collaborative.”

The collaborative project is seeking an additional five years of funding, according to Ed Keith, Deschutes County forester. There is no date for when any funding would be approved, but it may come by late 2019 or early 2020, he said.

The group was set up in 2010 to restore 250,000 acres in the Deschutes National Forest to more natural conditions that existed

prior to Euro-American exploration and settlement in Central Oregon more than 100 years ago.

Changes in Central Oregon started with the removal of Native Americans, which ended tribal fire use. This was followed by widespread livestock grazing, logging of the largest and most fire-resistant trees and suppression of wildfire. Together these factors altered the ecosystem, leading to overly dense forests, with less of the fire-tolerant species and more shrubs on the forest floor.

Low-intensity wildfires that would historically have swept through an area — taking out low brush but leaving tall trees alive — were put out before they could spread. The potential for an out-of-control wildfire in areas close to Bend, Sisters, Sunriver and La Pine had grown exponentially.

“Ecosystems evolved and adapted to thousands of years of fire and depend on it to remain healthy, commonly experiencing fire every five to 20 years up until human settlement. That frequent fire created a fire adapted ecosystem,” Keith said. “Excluding fire from that ecosystem is like trying to plug multiple holes in a leaking dam. Eventually, it will fail and the longer you hold back the water the more extreme the event will be.”

The collaborative — led by a 19-member group of volunteers representing recreational, scientific, logging and environmental interests — worked on a \$10.1 million budget over its first 10 years together. The Deschutes Land Trust, Central Oregon Trail Alliance, OSU Cascades and the Bend Fire Department are a few of the organizations represented in the collaborative.

A major accomplishment of the group was bringing together bitter rivals that had historically fought over the fate of Central Oregon lands, Keith said. “People who commonly met each other in the courtroom to fight over what they disagreed with in regards to forest management convened and started talking about common ground and how we can all work together to improve the condition of the forest,” Keith said. “This has accelerated work that had come to a near

standstill, increased safety to our communities in Central Oregon, improved wildlife habitat and created jobs for people working in the woods.”

Project activities included mowing and controlled burns to remove fuels from the forest floor. Trees that were harvested from the project were sold for lumber and wood chips. Funds raised from the wood sales were partially used to help offset some of the projects.

The West Bend Project, a 26,000-acre restoration job that started in 2013 and continues today, is the collaborative’s signature effort. Popular mountain biking areas including Phil’s Trail, the KGB Trail and Skills Loop were occasionally impacted by the smoke and prescribed burns from the project. Additional work created buffers around Sisters, among other locations.

The West Bend Project received the U.S. Forest Service Chief’s Honor Award in 2017 under the category of “Sustaining Our Nation’s Forests and Grasslands.” It was one of 20 demonstration sites nationwide selected by Congress to receive funding through the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Act.

In addition to prescribed burns and forest habitat restoration, the group was also active in public engagement and project awareness, through videos and blogs. The group intends to continue efforts even if funds are scarce.

“Regardless of funding from the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration program, the partners involved with the DCFP have agreed to continue to collaborate with the Forest Service past the 10 years of initial funding,” said Keith.

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