Partnership for Lake Abert and the Chewaucan Meeting #5

October 24, 2023 via Zoom

Participants present: Tess Baker, Colleen Withers, Dan Withers, Damon Brosnan, Trish Carroll, Marty St. Louis, Greg Green, Quincy Warner, Matt Anderson, Theo Dreher, Scott Hynek, Eugene Long, Autumn Muir, Steph Hayes, Anton Chiono, Abby Wicks, Ed Contreras, Joey Minear, Cole Hendrickson, Dacey Mercer, Justin Ferrell, Barry Shullanberger, Tyler Dearman, Philip Milburn, Teresa Wicks

Oregon State University Team Members present: Aaron Wolf, Henry Pitts, Georgina Mukwirimba

Oregon Consensus Facilitation Team present: Jennah Kiefer, Bobby Cochran

Action Item	Who	Date
Self-determine whether to participate as a voting/non-voting member of the group, which will be reflected in the Charter and decision-making process going forward	All participating entities	Before December 6th
RSVP here to the PLAC Meeting #6 on December 6th-7th	All participating entities	Before November 15th

Welcome, Agenda Review, and Updates

After welcoming everyone to the meeting, Bobby Cochran, Oregon Consensus, invited new participants to introduce themselves. Then everyone divided into small breakout groups to do further introductions and share any personal updates from the fall, as well as any relevant updates for the group.

After returning back together, the following updates were shared with the full group:

- Autumn Muir noted that she was excited that fire season was almost over. Marty St. Louis responded by sharing that there is a 70-80 acre fire near Fort Rock, which Dacey Mercer noted was on BLM land and is currently being mapped.
- High Country News reached out to interview a handful of Partnership members about the collaborative process underway.
- Two major field campaigns have been conducted over the summer for the Saline Lakes Ecosystems Integrated Water Availability Assessment project. More information on this project can be found here. One was conducted in late June/early July. They have a lot of point measurements, and are waiting on more data to come back.

- Ed Contreras shared an update on the Regional Shorebirds Surveys, which have more than 100 sites across five western states. This effort is resurrecting a survey effort from over 30 years ago that was spearheaded by Point Blue Conservation Science. Ed also asked a key person in the project to present to the group, and answer some questions tentatively around bird activity/behavior around drying lakes. More information on this effort can be found here.
- Teresa Wicks noted that East Cascades Audubon has conducted shorebird surveys at Abert for many years, and noted that their dataset could complement the work by the IWJV and Point Blue. She'd like a presentation to occur with both groups participating. Theo Dreher also noted that some of Scott Hynek's people have tagged Avocets, and that data could be useful.
- Theo also noted the upcoming OLA meeting that will include two presentations on Abert.

Ranching and Agriculture in the Marshes

This section consisted of three key sections. Colleen Withers provided a brief overview of ranching, and introduced her father-in-law Dan Withers. Dan provided a presentation on Lake County ranching activity, with a large emphasis on rancher's roles as "stewards of grass." Tess Baker then provided an in-depth presentation of activity in the area. The format included a month-by-month breakdown of the "hooves (cattle/ranching), fins (fish/wildlife/water), and feathers (bird activity)" within the Chewaucan Basin. This presentation will be summarized in chart format in the Joint Fact-Finding report, with a higher level of detail maintained in the summary below.

Colleen Withers

Colleen doesn't want anyone to think they're going to romanticize the ranching life, nor that the presentation be highly quantitative. She noted that they will focus on the month to month decision making processes of ranching, as well as the social dynamics of ranching (families, rural communities etc.). There is not a "typical" ranching year, but there are notable differences between wet and dry years that can be discussed. She introduced her father-in-law, and explained that his experience on the ground will be crucial for the group, and that the overall goals of these families in the basin are a very important part of the conversation.

Dan Withers

Dan began by summarizing Lake County, noting that 78% of the land in the county is public, so there's a fairly limited amount of space for private enterprise. The elevation is around 4300 feet, and at 42 degrees latitude (so the area is highly seasonal). There are only 8000+ people in the entire county, which is about 8,300 square miles.

They live in two rain shadows– as such, there are only about 10 inches of rainfall in Paisley each year, so it's very dry. They also live right on the edge of the Great Basin, so the entire area is internally drained. Soil quality isn't great, and the smaller drainages typically have better soils (but are limited in space). Overall, it's a great place to live, but the abiotic factors limit any ideas of farming. This hasn't meant that people haven't tried- you can see old ditches in fields, farming equipment etc. It wasn't a reliable way to make a living.

The only reliable resource is grass. The cow is a wonderful machine that is an automatic harvester for a resource that is otherwise unavailable to a mono-gastric being. He can't say enough about the ruminate animal- it takes a product that would otherwise be unavailable to us and turns it into a high quality protein.

The focus of ranchers is on grass more than the cows- as such, they focus on the landscapes that grow them. They are stewards of grass and of the landscape. Anything they can do to improve water as well as grass production, they'll do it.

Suffering cows could be just a bad year, or it could mean that mistakes were made in grass management. If your cows are suffering, you might have grazed too long and harmed the landscape. When cows are out on the landscape, ranchers are closely watching the feed and moving if needed. Dan has spoken to his father and grandfather about old practices, and modern practices are quite different. Some of this can be tied back to the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 (applied to federal lands, brought a lot of order/organization. It also benefited private lands.)

Rotational grazing wasn't common practice then- it's the dominant practice now, and ranchers are very focused on it. Areas with more erosive soils are grazed for less time. Ranchers are constantly learning- never over the learning curve. He noted that federal land is very tightly controlled, with extensive monitoring and consequences for regulatory violations. In the 60s and 70s, Dan saw a lot of overgrazed land, which he doesn't see as much anymore.

Moisture from the sky has the largest impact on the landscape– a five inch year is hard. Fifteen inch years are easier– it has nothing to do with management at that point. Dan stated that this uncontrollable variability means they have to focus on things they can control: the watersheds they use, the way they manage grass, how they graze and when they graze.

They're stewards of landscape and grass, and adjust their management accordingly. Dan views the opportunity to own and run ranches as a privilege- but there are still times where they think about selling and leaving. But those thoughts don't creep in very often- they view themselves as very blessed, and with that comes a responsibility to the land. They don't want careless management to be the reason that they have to leave the land. They want to pass their land on better than the way they received it, not just as good as it was.

Tess Baker

Tess noted that ranching is cyclical, with no clear beginning or end, but started the presentation in January. The notes below have been maintained with minimal editing to fully capture the extent of the presentation.

January

Hooves: Quiet time on the ranches. Cows have been weaned, 8 months pregnant, 9 month gestation. They're on the marshes, and are eating hay. It's delivered from bales and stacks from the fields brought on a truck, or the unique practice of bale grazing (see methods handout). When the marshes are bailed, thet stay where they are, it forms a dotted landscape. They can graze the bales, less compaction on the marsh, no strings (one less petroleum based product), provide thermal cover for animals, and spreads them out across the marsh when compared to line grazing. When the bales are done.

Fins: Jan 1 is the earliest water right in the marshes- this is unique to the area, but snowpack dependencies mean you don't see a lot of water coming down into the marsh, so very little of it is done

Feathers: first migratory birds, native mammals use the bales

February

Hooves: Calving, 24 hour watch, hiring additional employees. They continue to eat the hay described above, and could be supplemented with alfalfa as its a critical time (higher protein)

Fins: A little more water is coming out, Mature red band trout that live in the RER begin their journey upstream, (depending on the water year)

Feathers: More birds, more scavenging on the marsh due to bovine placentas (owls, birds of prey, coyotes etc). These scavengers will also eat a dead cow or calf.

March

Hooves: Still typically being fed hay, calving is wrapping up, cow/calf pairs are prepped. Branding (most rope brand), ear marking, castrating bull calves. 20-30 seconds for the whole process, with the mother their whole time, lower stress. Huge community moment after a long cold winter, people help each other out.

Fins: Water availability ramps up here through May, due to snowmelt in the uplands, warmer and longer days. Huge numbers of migratory birds- it's very loud! This behavior is encouraged by creeping waters, as seed shatter is brought to the surface. It also kickstarts invertebrates.

Feathers: Juvenile red bands in Dairy Creek begin their journey downstream, though some stay in their upstream creeks more permanently.

They also drag the marsh to break up manure and grass- it helps prevent large piles that would stop growth, and spreads the fertilizer manure.

April

Hooves: Cattle are off the marsh and are sent to the desert. Some families can trail, others must truck them. The male cattle go out with the cows, so this is also a breeding season. "Meet the ladies on the desert"

The males are kept in for around 60 days, promotes herd uniformity, cows have one or two cycles with them

Fins: The remainder of the water rights on the marsh begin here, they are the senior water rights. Jan 1 must give up to the April Senior. Groundwater irrigation also begins on the outside of the marsh, less than 10% of the water use in the area.

Feathers: Migratory bird activity is high, more breeding, nesting and rearing. It's their place now, lots of good water in and out, a sensitive time of year for them.

May

Hooves: Cattles come off the desert and move into the forested country. Most folks run on forest service allotments, or on deeded ground. They'll stay here for the rest of the summer and most of the fall. Ranchers are out there every day moving them, up as the season goes on to have cooler temps and green grass, keeping them out of riparian areas. They'll turn in early fall.

Fins: Surface water diversions peak in early May. Mature red band are near Dairy Creek and Elder Creek

Feathers: Tail end of the migration, but a lot choose to stay.

Water moves across the marsh- river goes through the middle, diversions on both sides of the marsh, all gravity flow (well set up, natural path) covers multiple fields at a time, stair steps down and fills the water tables. It also filters the water. Re-enters at the Narrows, then does it on the Lower Marsh. The river is the spine.

June

Hooves: Still in the forest, marsh is about to be hayed, it's drying up

Fins: Juvenile red band have completed downstream migration

Feathers: Wildlife begins to move to the forest for cooler temps. Slumps and sloughs aren't hayed, keep water on the marsh.

July

Hooves: Haying starters around the 4th of July. Smaller ranches take a month. larger could take two. None of they hay is sold outside of the valley. 50-60 perennial species of grass. One cutting, lingering water can produce a second growth for the fall forage/habitat. Some diversions for stock water for older cows having an easy summer on the marsh.

August

Hooves: Cattle still in the forest, pivots on the edge of the marsh, hayed end of June, July, and Sept. Planted some alfalfa. Most stay in the valley, or at least the county. Sold if there is an excess

Feathers: Critical time for young sage grouse. Access to bugs

September

Hooves: Still in the forest

Feathers: Sumps and stock water diversions used, migratory activity picks up

October

Hooves: Bringing down calves, weaning them. Cattle stay in the forest a little longer. Stay for 45 days before selling or sending them to a feedlot.
Fins: Groundwater irrigation is finished at this point
Feathers: Southward migration, seed shatter from harvest provides another food source.

November
Hooves: Brought down out of the forest, calves are gone. No irrigation water, just stockwater
Feathers: Native wildlife shifts to winter range, not typically the marsh. Southward migration fades.

December
Hooves: Preparing to calve, bale grazing
Feathers: No migratory birds

Questions
Trish thanked Dan for his presentation and noted his evident love of the land. She asked about red band trout and groundwater. Groundwater use is more consistent, though people will turn off the outside pivot (significant area of a center pivot spot)

Drought affected ranching processes are complicated: harvested grass could be half the amount, cattle end up on the highway during dry years due to increased stress. You need more employees to manage the additional workload, but also have to let people go due to rising operational costs. Dry year grass stewardship means getting off permitted land sooner, weaning calves sooner, and processing cows (sell them to lessen feed costs, open cows are pregnant). There are also significantly lower conception rates in dry years. Dry years impact multiple years. Ranchers only get paid once a year as you typically only sell cows once a year. If you have to sell cows in a dry year, then buy heifers later to rebuild your herd, it's a multi-year financial hit.

There are very minimal differences between the upper and the lower marsh. The upper marsh is larger, they have some of the better fields, dry years have less water sent to the lower marsh (which is partly by design).

Colleen noted that Simplot has done a great job supporting family ranches- comparison of personal and corporate ranches. They do a pretty good job of employing local families. Tess noted that as an employee of Simplot and a member of a generational ranching family, it's not as simple as "personal vs corporate" ranches. Generations of families have worked on the marshes, even though they don't necessarily own it.

Joint Fact Finding
Henry Pitts, OSU, provided an update on the Joint Fact Finding subgroup effort today. He walked through the format and structure of the draft joint narrative outline and highlighted the section, lead authors, and OSU supports for each section addressing 1) Water Resources, Ron Larson; 2) Agriculture Practices, Jack O'Leary; 3)

Fish & Wildlife, Stan Senner; 4) Cultural Heritage/Lived Experience, JP Patt; and 5) Drought Mitigation, tentatively Ed Contreras. He shared that during the December meeting, each of the leads will walk through the sections and will also include a panel of on-hand external experts to help support conversations around areas of disagreement. First, the subcommittee will review the draft joint narrative and make refinements while striving to come to agreement. Then the finalized joint narrative will be shared in advance of the December meeting with the full group (ideally at least two weeks prior). Aaron Wolf added that the bulk of the December meeting will focus on this joint narrative and continuing the iterative shared learning process. OSU is building a website to house all shared resources and referenced documents which will be accessible to everyone.

Paisley Meeting Planning

Colleen told the group about a field tour they just held for a group of artists on the marsh, and expressed concerns about a lack of visible, relevant content available for viewing in December. Theo noted that weather constraints could mean the field tour is provisional. Autumn offered to lend her expertise/time to planning a field tour.

Jennah Kiefer, Oregon Consensus, noted that future planning at the meeting could involve next steps, data gaps, goal production etc. This could include nesting objectives within the high-level statement of (involvement). Determination of involvement as a voting/non-voting member must be made and communicated to the PSU team prior to the December meeting. Please RSVP to the meeting prior to November 15th.

Next Steps and Adjourn

In closing, Jennah reminded the group about the next meeting scheduled for December 6 and 7. The meeting will be in-person in Paisley