

May Guild Presentation
John George, Director of
Forest Access For All

My name's John. I was born and raised in Eastern Oregon been there since they came out on the Oregon Trail.

I'm with two different groups. The American Land Access Alliance is found mostly in rock hunters' groups. My Dad was a very active rock hunter, which is witnessed by all the petrified wood stumps found all over our front yard. I am also the newly elected director of a group called Forest Access For All out of Baker in NorthEast Oregon where I was born. ALAA is a group I got affiliated with the group Forest Access For All. The president of that group is currently a lady by the name of Shirley Leeson. ALAA has been very active in Southern California and Arizona working on access issues for rock hunters. I have spoken to a couple of their different groups in Kennewick over the last couple of years; a very active group of folks. The group worked on, FAFA in Baker, we've been actively involved in working with the Forest Service to keep our mountains open in NE Oregon. I don't know how many of you folks have visited NE Oregon. Big mining country; Baker was founded around the concept of gold mining. My family has a small gold mine that we patented in the mid 90's, 20 acres in an area called Green Mountain. Big, big gold country. We've stewarded the piece of ground over the years. We do a little bit of prospecting on it, but nothing big. FAFA has been on this Travel Management Rule that the Forest Service has been trying to enact on the Wallowa Whitman National Forest for going on seven years. We keep going around the horn with them to keep the mountains open. I wanted to come and visit with you and show how it can affect folks like you and the things you do. I am not a political person; this crosses all political boundaries. I am not a government basher. That's not my interest either. I have a great deal of respect for government employees; I think some folks get a little out of control but also that's not what I'm here to do. I'm just here to talk about the fundamentals of your access and what's getting ready to happen in NE Oregon.

To step back a little bit, the Travel Management Rule was enacted by the USDA in 2005. That rule was put into place simply to help designate travel routes on the National Forest road systems throughout the US. All they were supposed to do was go in, look at the road systems, designate a use to them and inventory the roads. That rule has been manipulated to the point where they are using it as a hammer to close off access to the public. This is being done to the scale that what we consider an open forest system will be used to create a closed forest system, which means you will not be able to use motorized means to get out on the national forest unless on a designated route that the Forest Service deems you should be traveling on. So Wallowa Whitman National Forest, which I consider my home forest, is 2.3 million acres in size; it's a big forest. A little bit over half of that forest is under a wilderness designation; no motorized access at all for hunting, firewood hunting, gathering gems and rocks, or anything. What the forest service would like to do is lay on top of that the Travel Management Rule which allows them to designate motorized use only on designated routes in the forest. It's kind of like that Keep Off The Grass rule you see in parks. You can go down the trail, just don't get off the trail. So we have less than half available for motorized access now. If they get what they want, we will go from less than half that we have now to about 1.5% of the forest that we will be able to get on to. That will devastate our community. Not only will it be hard on our community, it will be hard on you, who want to go out on our forest to go rock hunting or hiking. Let's say you had a spot you like to think of as your little honey hole, you really enjoyed getting to, and it was up a draw somewhere. If you don't know that road was going to get closed, let's say from the main road up it was 20 miles, and they close that road on you and don't designate a use for that road, you will not be allowed to travel up it. You'll be subject to a penalty of up to \$5000 and/or six months in jail. I don't think people in the Portland metropolitan area know those kinds of penalties are going to go into effect. They tried to pass the Travel Management Plan in 2012. We had a large outcry in

NE Oregon. It was in the Oregonian down here. We had about 3000 appeals filed. They have a time limit on responding to those appeals. With that many appeals, they simply did not have enough time, a ten year period, to meet with each appellant, so they withdrew the decision.

Fast forward two years later. One of the appeals we filed was based on the fact that the Travel Management Rule did not meet the current forest plan they have in place. The current 1994 plan in place now states that the forest is an open forest unless closed. So they have to designate a closure area. They want to put a Travel Management Rule that says it is closed unless open, a fundamentally different concept. So now they are coming back at us with a revision to the forest plan. And amazingly enough, the revision says that they can designate routes, and they can have a forest that is closed unless opened. So what I came to ask you is, as a group or individuals, to please find a way of becoming involved in this process. I feel kind of selfish coming to you to talk about something in my forest, but if you come to my forest as a rock hound or a hiker, it is going to hurt you too. I would be willing to entertain any questions you have for me.

Q: You're basically saying you can't go hiking if they close the forest.

A: You can go hiking. I don't want folks thinking that. Yes, you can. But if you have point A that you usually start at, hiking from there, and it usually took you a 20 mile drive or even a 5 mile drive to get to point A, unless you've spoken up for your road, you'll have to start before that. For me, I'm 40 years old, I still have the ability to get out and do that. My Dad though, is 65 years old, and won't be able to do that. I have an uncle that's 85, he's definitely not going to be able to. He's worked hard all his life. There's been several roads closed that my family helped build back in the early 1900s. They have now been ripped out, and we just can't get to it; they're just inaccessible. Same thing if you have areas you would like to go to. Anybody in this group that goes to the Wallowa- Whitman to go rock hunting? Sumpter, Freedmore, Cornucopia? It's important, folks. I just want to make sure that you are aware of what's going on.

Q: Who are you communicating with to stop this?

A: we have been working really closely with the Wallowa-Whitman's supervisor's office. I brought some handouts that show how and where to comment. The Forest Plan Review is your typical government bureaucratic process. They've been engaged in developing this plan for 11 years now. Several iterations of staff have come through the system and rewritten. When the Travel Management Plan didn't work out, they really got aggressive with it. They started holding comment periods on their draft environmental impact statements. The draft environmental impact statement was released on March 14th of this year. We had initially 90 days to comment. Anybody can comment on the document. It's a 1600 page document that took them 11 years to write with a bunch of Masters and PHDs on staff. They're handing it to high school educated folks and telling us we have to go through this document and give substantive comments on it. They overwhelm you. My group Fafa, filed for an extension for giving comments, so we have another 60 days. So we have until August 15th to file comments with the Blue Mountain Forest Plan revision team, or the regional office here in Portland. They will take those comments in; they're supposed to go through them, figure out how to make them work, and mold the document around what the people want, for what they call the greater good. What we've found with comment periods is that they don't put a lot of heart into them. But if you don't comment, then you won't be able to object to whatever they release as the final document. So it's important that we get folks to comment about their concerns. Fafa and ALAA are working up reference material for folks to give substantive comments. We have to be careful about that. We have had folks who ask us to work up a form letter because they are concerned about the same thing that we are. You can't do that. What happens is that the Forest Service disregards it as the same comment. So, even though you took time to submit it, it's not a substantive comment. The handout gives you a breakdown of how to write a substantive comment. If there are questions, your email or phone call goes either directly to me or my cousin in Boise, Idaho. We want to help folks develop those substantive comments.

Q: Why are they writing road closures? Is it an economically driven thing? And what happens to the roads, do they keep them up at all?

A: The reasoning behind closing the roads is multifaceted. The reasons they list are elk security, wildlife security, sedimentation to streams, user conflict between motorized and non-motorized users, maintenance cost, and that the roads were never intended to be permanent. My background is range management and soil science. When you hear the reasons, you think they are logical. But when you look at the science of why wildlife moves to private land, it's not motorized access. It's fresh feed and vegetation on private lands. Private lands are actively managed, you see a lot more green growth, a lot more browse, instead of what is on stagnant public land. You can go down the list and there is a counter to each one founded in science and logic. But the Forest Service seems to want to ignore that because it is more agenda driven. There is this concept of Tread Lightly, the idea that we should leave pristine, untouched forest that has had very little impact by humans. It's a great concept and something that most of us strive to do. I do. But they are using heavily weighted science to try to push an agenda, and it's not taking into consideration the impact on rural communities. One of the greatest arguments to us have been that the people of the Portland Metropolitan area, Western Oregon, demand that this access be defined. They say that you all, in the Portland Metropolitan Area, want this area closed down. That is not fundamentally true. When I go to a meeting in LaGrande, Oregon, a town of 12,000, 300 members of my community show up to say they want my mountains left open. When I go to a Portland meeting, 48 people show up in a 2,000,000 population, over half of those were pro-access people, and the other side is the pro-preservation side of the argument. I have a hard time believing that people in the Portland Metropolitan area are rallying to lock me and the local residents of NE Oregon out of the mountains. I just don't see it. It's not really to the benefit of the people in the Portland Metropolitan area. When folks like you want to go out and visit my mountains, you won't be able to get out into them. I just don't buy it. There are a couple of different classifications if a road isn't going to be left open. It will either go into storage, or will be identified for decommissioning and obliteration. That is depressing to me on a couple of different levels. My great-grandfather and grandfather built a lot of those roads for a reason. They were loggers and ranchers and they had to get out to get resources off the landscape. Most of our sawmills are gone in Eastern Oregon. But that land still needs to be harvested. We need to do something with the vegetation on the landscape, or its all going to burn, and the sedimentation rates will make the roads look like nothing. They'll either put them into storage, doing no maintenance on them or they will spend exorbitant amounts of money to decommission and obliterate the roads.

Q: Are these not areas where they're actively logging or can be actively logged?

A: On existing roads, they could log them but what happens is when a logging unit is put up for bid, we have two environmental groups that jump straddle on every logging fell that gets put into the public, and they sue. It's called Sue and Settle. The average environmental litigation nets and environmental group roughly \$230,000 in taxpayer funds. When you look at the group's staff, they all have a legal degree. So it's a group of lawyers who go and sue the government under the idea of protecting the environment.

Q: So the environmentalists want to take away the roads used to fight fires, but the damage from the fires costs an enormous amount. Do they realize that?

A: To them, those are natural events. They would rather see that forest burn and start the cycle over again. You're bringing up a very good point. Men like my Grandpa and my Dad fought with crews that suppressed these fires for decades. There was a huge vegetative build up. On average you should see about 70 tons of woody material on the landscape as a historic, pre-European settlement amount. You're looking at numbers like 700-2000 tons of material now on the landscape. We're set up now for some really major fires.

Q: These fires can do a lot of damage to residential areas. A: We're fortunate we haven't seen that urban sprawl like in Colorado, but my family's place is in a little tiny community between Prairie City and Baker. If we ever see a 1901 style fire, it would overrun my Mom and Dad's place. It just scares us to death, but it's just reality living in the woods.

Q: Are there any of the senators or congressmen in the state in support of suppression? Who's on your side?

A: Representative Walden has put legislation in the House to work on this. I've worked with his staff on the issue, I don't get the feeling they're as whole heartedly invested in it as I'd like them to be, though it's a campaign year, and they say they're trying.

Q: Is there any recognition of the role that Native Americans have played in forest management in the past?

A: There is some recognition of that, but when you talk to the biologists and such of the National Forest, they pass those off as anecdotal. It's not following the classic Western or European mentality of what science is. If you learned it through hands on experience, or historical on the ground knowledge, they don't accept that as knowledge. One of the arguments I've been able to pick up is the concept of traditional cultural knowledge, which I think is very valid, but getting the Forest Service to accept that has been very difficult. In fact, nearly impossible sometimes. I know they recognize it, but as a management tool they don't accept it.

Q: Who or what is the driving force behind all of this? Who wants to close the forest and why?

A: There is a big push at the national level with the Forest Service with different groups; the Sierra Club, some of these bigger environmental groups. They are really pushing this agenda.

Q: They don't remember what happened in Yellowstone Park in 1988, do they? With all the vegetation there, it burned the whole park down.

A: No, I guess not. And what concerns me is that groups like yours don't even know things like this are going on. So if you want to go out into our forest, you want to go pan for gold in a little creek outside of Sumpter, or you want to go out in the woods, and you go to go down a little spur road to get to a creek, if we don't get this stopped, you are not going to get there very easily. You might not get there at all.

Q: How will these roads be marked?

A: They won't be. You're just supposed to know.

There are going to be what they call MVU maps, Motorized Vehicle Use maps. It is printed on newspaper, no landmarks on it, a bunch of lines running here and there. It will have a few road numbers on it, and you're supposed to just know where you're at on that map. So one of the things I've been visiting with folks is, we get into this argument about the maps not being functional. It's not about the maps. It's about them restricting your access to public land that you have every right to go to, and you should be able to as long as you live within the current rules they have in place. They have a litany of rules that are in place to manage the landscape. They just choose not to enforce them. I know that from personal experience. I've found garbage dumps that hunters have left, with their mail in it. I've taken that information to the local ranger offices, and they told me they are not going to mess with it. It's not their business and they're not going to do it. I turned a guy in for tearing up the woods, they won't do it. If it's not a pot bust or something big, they just don't seem interested.

Q: Does this seem to be a dry run for all national forests?

A: Here's the sad part. My two forests, the Malheur and the Wallowa-Whitman, are the last two standing in Oregon. You've already got this in all other forests in Oregon. And the reason the Malheur and the Wallowa-Whitman have not fallen yet, is because the people in NE Oregon stood up and were very vocal about it. You have no idea that this took place on the Mt. Hood or the Deschutes. They all fall under the Travel Management Rule. So if you go out to a national forest and you don't know what road you're supposed to be on and you get on the wrong road, or you get off of whatever the buffer is, in some forests it's 100 feet, in some it's 30 feet, in some it's no feet. You're supposed to stay on the road and that's as far as you can go. Beyond that, you're technically in violation and you can get fined. Now they're telling

everybody they are in an educational period, where they just talk to you about it. But if there wasn't an intent to try to effect a fine and penalty on you they wouldn't have put \$5,000 and six months in the law. I know folks in the Umatilla forest, which fell under this about six years ago, who got \$2,000 fines for doing nothing more than going a couple hundred feet off the road to cut firewood. So you can envision if you are a rock hunter going out to look for gems how that can turn out for you.

Q: Are there currently areas up there where you can go pan for gold?

A: My suggestion on that is that you stop at the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest supervisor's office, actually the Baker Ranger District just moved into the same office. I know Granite's a really good area to go hit, Sumpter's a really good area. You get more out toward Halfway there are some good prospecting opportunities out there, too. You always want to check with your local supervisor's office.

Q: What gemstone material is pulled out of that area?

A: I know there's a little bit of garnet that comes out of that area, a little bit of rough jade, but nothing really high quality. Get in the right spot, and there's fairly good gold. To patent the place up you have to show that a man can make a living off of it year round. We ran that through ours, and we pass that test. It is about a 15 year process doing it. I come from a long family of fighters, I guess. When my Grandpa made that claim back in the '50s, he built a small cabin on it, within the rules of that time. He essentially put it on tamarack skids, that way he could move it if he needed. In the '70s a movement started up that said we can't have people on the landscape. In '77 and the early '80s the Forest Service made a real hard push to have us removed from that claim, so we looked at the process of doing a patent. My passion for access and protecting people on this came from a personal story. When I was 10 we still had the claim. My Grandma was a little lady about 80 pounds soaking wet. My Grandpa had passed about five years earlier. They had been pushing at her that the cabin needed to go. They showed up there one day. I remember them going around my grandmother in a circle and berating her. "We're going to burn it, tear it down, you'll never have it again." It made her sick, gave her shingles, and I swore I'd never see anybody treated like that again. And I don't want you folks to lose your access because you didn't know about it. I'm a resource, I want to help you if I can. FAFA and ALAA can help you, but you need to contact us.

Q: How is that going to affect if he's going rock hunting, is that going to curtail him from digging in the ground?

A: I haven't gotten down to that specific part of the revision that, but there has been talk of further restrictions in that. There is already a restriction of how much material you can take off the landscape at any one time. I've been told they ratcheted that up some. I've been fairly active with the Eastern Oregon Miner's Association in Baker. Their big concern is to continue the ability to explore for prospecting. All that legislation passed in the late 1800s was to protect the miners. They're trying to kill all that.

Q: Is this spilling over into BLM?

A: BLM is going through the same process called the Resource Management Plan. They are currently working on theirs. All Resource Management Plans in the West have been put on hold. There are designated routes; Utah's got a mess going on right now. What has put them on hold is the sage grouse discussion they're having. They're looking at listing the sage grouse in 2015. The sage grouse, if it gets listed, will be the spotted owl of the West. It will hurt the cattle industry something fierce. Baker has put theirs on hold at the moment so they can deal with the sage grouse issue.

I appreciate your time. You don't know how much it means to me and the people in NE Oregon. If there's anything I can do to help you get informed about it, please let me know.

Editor's Note: Go to the Forest Access For All website to view the materials showing how to put together a substantive comment at www.forestaccessforall.org. On the home page is a blog entry entitled

IMPORTANT – COMMENT ASSISTANCE!!! Expand this notice to see all the information to which John was referencing

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