

Community Forest subcommittee takes another baby step

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TEANAWAY – Thursday, June 23, a subcommittee working under the umbrella of the Teanaway Community Forest Citizens Advisory Committee met at the armory building in Ellensburg for the fifth time to continue work on a cattle grazing management plan.

Although subcommittee members still appear to be united in their goal to identify ecologically sensitive areas and to restore the watershed as prescribed by the Yakima Integrated Plan –at this stage of the process it is clear it is too early for the group to come to a consensus on how to do it. Why?

No smoking gun?

Subcommittee member **Jim Halstrom** said, “I haven’t yet seen a smoking gun,” implying to date the subcommittee lacks the blanket of evidence that would – in a perfect world – positively identify every single one of the critically sensitive areas in the Forest’s 55,000-acres where impacts from grazing cattle are as obvious as trout in milk.

Even if there were volumes of evidence collected over the 20 years cattleman **Sam Kayser** has been grazing his cattle in the Teanaway there are subcommittee members who would argue about how much of the damage was due to

grazing cattle.

Said range rider **Bill Johnson**, “People and roaming [ungulates] are impacting the watershed, too: deer and elk, campers, bikers, hikers, ATV users, RV users, snowmobilers and landowners.”

Still, without empirical evidence or funding to get the work done in the timeframe allotted, the subcommittee appears to be cornered and left alone to approach the challenge from another direction.

Maps: a good place to start

At last Thursday’s meeting Department of Natural Resources project manager **Eric Winford**, Fish and Wildlife expert **Jeff Burnham** and NOAA scientist **Sean Gross** handed out color-coded maps they and others had produced with GIS mapping software.

The maps and the effort it took to produce them have been characterized as a significant baby-step toward the goal of framing a starting point for the management plan.

Said Winford, “These maps show areas we could protect sensitive areas by fencing-in or fencing-out the cattle, but by no means are these maps to be considered perfect or final, nor should we proceed in our discussion under the assumption that fencing is the only tool at our disposal.”

Gross agreed.

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"Although fencing is proven as an effective tool we also should be looking at others, including prescribed grazing, giving certain zones periodic rests from grazing, and where possible using geographical features as a substitute for fencing."

Differing perspectives

Under the assumption the subcommittee will eventually tweak the maps, identify tools needed to establish protective barriers, and then estimate funding requirements – there still remains the chore to get all that done as far as possible outside the framework of a guessing game.

In a perfect world with unlimited funding the way to accomplish that is to walk and photograph the 50,000 acres and that's not likely going to happen, though so far the subcommittee has conducted a handful of field trips that seem to have helped spur the discussion.

"There are good spots and there are bad spots, but from what I've seen from my involvement in this project – cattle have a minimal impact on the forest," said **Tip Hudson**, of the Washington State University Extension Service in Ellensburg.

Hudson made that comment after showing the subcommittee photos of grazing areas he'd taken from the same vantage points between 2006 and 2016.

Unfortunately, as he said himself, his photo study is too limited in scope to use for long-term trend analyses or to identify all the proverbial smoking guns.

Illustrating the gauntlet subcommittee members must overcome and, to a degree, offsetting Hudson's comment, Gross pointed out, "Water restoration expert **Scott Nicolai** recently presented the subcommittee with a photographic study similar in scope as Hudson's – but it showed significant damage cattle have caused."

Said Johnson in a recent telephone interview, "In the 18 years I've been on the range for Sam, every creek [every sensitive ripar-

About the subcommittee

The subcommittee is comprised of scientists, cattlemen, landowners, and state agency leaders representing the Departments of Natural Resources and Fish and Wildlife.

Since October 2013, when the state channeled \$100M to the Department of Natural Resources to purchase the 55,000-acre Forest from New York commodities broker **John Rudy**, the two agencies and the Teanaway Community Forest Citizens Advisory Committee have invested time, energy and resources to ensure the state's first Community Forest grows into a model project that could be employed in other parts of the country.

Clarification

At-the end of the grazing season cattleman **Sam Kayser** will be using **Bussoli Field** to load his cattle for transport to his ranch in **Ellensburg**. This season for the first time in 20 years he did not off-load his cattle at **Bussoli** to give vegetation in the area a breather.

ian area] out there has become bushier, more difficult to navigate. That's a good sign."

Stalemate?

Gross said what the subcommittee is left with are contrasting perspectives based on anecdotal evidence, with one perspective offered by a grazing management expert and the other from a watershed restoration expert.

He went on to say given the standoff he believes an exhaustive study aimed to produce qualitative and quantitative evidence isn't really necessary to get started with best practice approaches to watershed restoration.

The research has already been done

Said Gross, "There is a vast amount of literature out there, in-

cluding one study of the watershed conducted by Ecology that clearly shows the Teanaway is in trouble. In addition there is a vast amount of research out there indicating cattle grazing does indeed impact sensitive riparian areas."

Although to a "judge" charged to weigh both sides of the argument, statements provided by Hudson and Gross likely would not withstand cross examination in a "court of law," but there doesn't seem to be any doubt the subcommittee has no other choice but to agree on and adopt a strategy in a timely fashion to meet the deadline.

Said subcommittee meeting facilitator **Jim Huckabay**, "We've got to have a management plan done by October."

As one subcommittee member assured that's doable, and overtime most everyone involved assumes the plan will be amended and improved over time, but come 2025 there's another deadline looming.

According to directives set forth in the **Yakima Integrated Plan**, in about nine years time the Teanaway watershed must be restored to the degree that it helps to add 214,000 acre feet of new water into the **Yakima River Basin**.

Failure to do so could jeopardize the Forest's future, meaning in one scenario it could be put up for sale on the open market.

"You have to think in terms of how long it takes for a tree to grow," said Gross, implying it takes time to see results in a watershed restoration effort of the kind proposed for the Teanaway, and it seems getting started early is on every stakeholder's mind.

Next meeting

The subcommittee meets again on Thursday, July 21, at the armory building, located at the **Kittitas County Fairgrounds**. All are welcome to attend and observe.

At that meeting it is hoped a technical team will return from a survey of the Teanaway Community Forest with a new map displaying proposed areas for prescribed grazing.