



INTERIOR COLUMBIA BASIN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT PROJECT

Location:

*Eastern Oregon
and Washington,
Idaho, western
Montana and
Wyoming,
Northern Nevada
and Utah*

Project size:

144 million acres

Initiator:

*President Bill
Clinton*

PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

The vast expanse from the crest of the Cascade Range to the Continental Divide defines the boundaries of the Interior Columbia Basin area. The Columbia River Basin, as well as parts of the Klamath Basin, the Great Basin, and Yellowstone National Park are encompassed in this region. The varied topography includes high mountain alpine landforms, dissected plains, and the Columbia Plateau. Predictably, vegetation types vary widely. Ponderosa Pine and mixed conifer forests in Washington and Oregon contrast to rangelands comprised of juniper, sagebrush, and bunch grasses. Wetter climates in Idaho and Montana yield a vegetation pattern of sub-alpine fir, white pine, and some lodgepole pine. Among the 17 federally-listed threatened and endangered species are the gray wolf, grizzly bear, Snake River salmon, and several plants. The area hosts as many as 200 candidate species to the list.

ECOSYSTEM STRESSES

The area has undergone tremendous alteration of its hydrologic system. A series of dams impound the Columbia River for power and recreation; a network of reservoirs and irrigation canals has been constructed to spur agricultural development and to control flooding. These stresses and overfishing have resulted in the decline of anadromous fish and other fish species.

The region's watersheds have been affected by excessive logging, road-building, and mining in concentrated spots. Stresses from a decade-long drought has exacerbated the risk of fire. Insect infestations and diseases have also plagued the forested lands recently. The proliferation of exotic species represents a

substantial threat of further alteration of the ecosystem.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Changing social values concerning old growth and forest health, culminating with the Forest Summit in Portland, Oregon, in 1993, were a strong catalyst for the Interior Columbia Basin Project. Although President Clinton was unsuccessfully lobbied to include the Columbia Basin on the summit's agenda, he directed the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and other federal agencies to develop a scientifically sound plan for the region's public lands. Agency staff on the project have conducted an inventory and assessment of what trends in resource use are occurring, how the trends and ecological conditions will change in the future, and what species, disturbance processes, and elements of the ecosystem are at risk.

The team created four long-term scenarios that highlight the social, economic, and ecological consequences and trade-offs if society chooses to 1) withdraw from public lands management and allow natural processes to occur without interference; 2) maximize the economic output of public lands; 3) focus on maintaining ecosystem processes and then distributing any excess benefits; or 4) continue with present management activities. Three additional scenarios are projected to be developed before the project's two-year charter expires in mid-1996. The report is targeted at decision makers in federal agencies.

INTERIOR COLUMBIA BASIN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT PROJECT -- continued

PRESENT STATUS & OUTLOOK

The project's multi-disciplinary team has reduced the uncertainty in the region's natural resource decision making. The team is re-framing the question of resource management from "What would happen if ... ?" to "Do we want this to happen?"

Factors Facilitating Progress

A primary force for progress is the leadership of agency officials and their desire to avoid a repeat of the events that led up to the Forest Summit. Another has been the

redefinition of "openness." Input from numerous federal and state agencies, interest groups, private landowners, and ordinary citizens is actively sought. The public is kept informed through presentations, open stakeholders meetings, the distribution of draft material, a computer bulletin board, and a 1-800 telephone number.

Obstacles to Progress

Obstacles have included establishing working relationships with partners (largely due to constraints imposed by the Federal Advisory

Committee Act), working within at least 20 federal land management jurisdictions, deciding the appropriate "turf" for science and management, and learning how to define and structure an open process. As reports are finalized, continued leadership is needed to buffer the political pressure to change the findings.

Contact information:

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