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**Ideas exchanged on Upper Lochsa: County officials don't anticipate official stance on land exchange**

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The Friends of the Palouse Ranger District held the third in a series of meetings Friday night on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement on the Upper Lochsa Land Exchange. Their aim: to make the project more visible and understandable for the public.

"We are still finding people that don't know about it, and they're affected by it," said Cheryl Halverson, a member of the FPRD.

The meeting began at 5 p.m. at the Latah County Fairgrounds in Moscow. Previous meetings were held by the group in Potlatch and Tensed.

Members of the FPRD and retired U.S. Forest Service employees also took their message to the Latah County Commissioners at their weekly review Wednesday, and Chairwoman Jennifer Barrett attended the FPRD's Friday meeting.

The group's focus has been to provide information on how to formulate comments on the draft document, which are due to the U.S. Forest Service by March 9.

Providing comments or concerns about specific parcels or aspects and relating them to particular page and section numbers of the DEIS has been advised by the FPRD and the Forest Service during the comment period.

For a resident to make an impact, the comments must be submitted in a way that will be meaningful to the Forest Service, Halverson said. Simply saying a person is not in favor of the exchange is not specific enough to make a difference, she said.

Information on the National Environmental Policy Act and copies of the DEIS were available for the public to review at the Friday night meeting.

The original 90-day comment period was extended due to public interest in the project and Forest Supervisor Rick Brazell's meeting schedule. Brazell will make the ultimate decision on the project, which isn't expected until the fall.

The DEIS was released Nov. 22. It includes four action alternatives and one no-action alternative, which is preferred by members of the FPRD.

The preferred alternative for the Forest Service is designed to maximize the purchase component of the exchange while minimizing the acres of federal land that would be exchanged. It would be phased in over three years, allowing the agency time to secure funding for the purchase of as many acres as possible. The amount of federal land exchanged could vary from about 6,200 acres to 14,200 acres.

Barrett said she doesn't anticipate the commissioners taking an official stance on the exchange as a board, but she said the commission is dedicated to hearing from all sides of the issue and encourages the public to stay involved.

She said residents of Latah County deserve accurate and timely information on the progress of the project from all parties involved.

"We talk about transparency in our government, and in this instance, I don't think that's totally been the case," she said.

She said commissioners must also weigh potential benefits of the exchange could lead to more private property taxes coming into the county as well as jobs for area loggers.

Forest Service retiree John Krebs said it was important for the commission to keep in mind the Forest Service also provides jobs to area residents, including maintaining roads, tree stands and commercial thinning opportunities.

Commissioner Dave McGraw said although the board can do little to next-to-nothing to legally sway the outcome of the exchange, the commissioners are responsible for the well being of the people of the county and their concerns. Staying informed about the process and progress of the exchange is important to residents and to the board, he said.

"Both sides have so much emotion in it now, I'm just trying to sift through all emotion and just look at the bare facts," he said. "I'm still gathering facts and listening to everything everyone's got to say, but one of my main concerns is getting people back to work."

Barrett and McGraw agreed with Commissioner Tom Stroschein that the most concern the board has about the exchange relates to parcels of land located adjacent to Mary Minerva McCroskey State Park.

McGraw said the public input on those particular parcels, as well as parcels near Elk River, which have since been dropped from the exchange, show the public process and feedback has made a difference.

Stroschein said he will discuss the exchange with neighboring Benewah County commissioners at an upcoming meeting in Boise.

Information on the exchange is posted on the Forest Service website, [www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/clearwater/), under the heading "Projects."

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