

## **A Conversation with Jeff Rose BLM Burns District Manager Burns, Oregon**

**by  
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A job that includes the management of a wide variety of public lands resources across 3.36 million acres of southeast Oregon might not be your ideal. A job that, on any given day, could find you, quite literally, chasing down wild horses (as was the case the morning of our meeting), authorizing controlled burns of Western juniper to restore water resources, or brokering land use objectives of ranchers and recreationists might not be your idea of heaven. But thankfully it is to Jeff Rose, the Bureau of Land Management Burns District Manager since 2016.

He is the equivalent of a CEO running an organization that is one of the biggest employers in this vast region with multiple departments focused on different aspects of maintaining healthy public lands. “Out of the seven or eight main resource areas I’m responsible for, I daily touch on four or five of them. Organizations that have one target species they manage for are lucky. I have a million species to focus on, humans included.” His skills and experience are equal to the task. He holds a bachelor’s in biology, a master’s in rangeland resources, has eleven years of rangeland research at the Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center, and that many again as Fire Ecologist for the [Burns BLM office](#) before being appointed District Manager. As importantly, he also has the temperament: affable, good humored, patient, and keen minded.

Rose recognizes that people’s demands on public lands are as varied as their demographics and ethnicities. He also recognizes the care required when “in management of a resource and in a political position as a government employee.” His solution is to put community at the front and center of his decisions while, at the same time, accommodating policy changes, shifts in climate, and evolving social dynamics. “For every permittee and rancher there are as many different wants and desires. Multiple use is not every use on every acre, but I still have to consider them all,” says Rose. “When ranchers, BLM and other groups put their heads together it is a win-win. The more collaborative we are, the better off we are, be it conservation, at grazing management, or working to leverage public and private resources to manage more efficiently.”

Any CEO would agree managing for the present while anticipating an unknowable, uncertain future is both art and science. Rose starts with rangeland science followed closely by community and cultural values. Why does it matter and to whom? What does winning look like? And, the biggie, what is the management time related to the issue? One year? A decade? 10,000 years? He acknowledges that when a crisis occurs, such as fire, drought or range depletion, there’s pressure to come up with a quick fix but that’s exactly when, Rose explains, taking the long view is critical. “We can mess it up in a year, but we can’t make it better in a year. We have to see in 10,000-year increments.”



More than 170,000 acres of Steens Mountains Wilderness is managed by the Burns District. — Mark Darnell

Rose is kept awake at night by stories of well-intentioned rangeland management decisions having unexpected consequences. “Can I make that kind of mistake in this job?” Rose asks himself. “I feel a strong responsibility to pay close attention. So much is at stake. Every decision I sign, I have never made a dumb decision...” he pauses “...at the moment I made it, but a few seconds later, new information comes in and changes your frame.”

So, how to fill those gaps of knowledge and, by extension, take care of the wild places we love and rely on? More education about the natural world is Rose’s prescription. It might seem a non sequitur that led Jeff Rose to Harney County, Oregon from a suburban town in southwestern Connecticut where he grew up. Key to the story was the emphasis local public schools and his family placed on learning about and experiencing nature and its importance in understanding the world on a larger scale. He recalls being glued to every Wild Kingdom episode on TV. “It was all about nature when I was a kid.” Rose feels it’s critical to start education about the natural world early in young people’s education. “A one-day outdoor school doesn’t count.” He advocates saturating youth, especially urban and suburban youth, “with an appreciation of nature, with the outside.” Once in college it’s too late to begin, according to Rose. “Many recreationists consume natural spaces but don’t know and appreciate them deeply, don’t know what makes nature tick. To know a place, you have to experience it during different phases of the year in different years and see how Mother Nature responds, see yourself as part of that larger system.”

I tell him I was confused by a sign in downtown Burns that read “No Parking 2:30 a.m. until 6:30 a.m., November through March.” Rose explains it’s a holdover from the days when the winter months reliably produced many feet of snow and the Burns snowplows needed full access to the streets to keep them clear. Not so much anymore. Rose has seen it this dry before but not this hot. And the seasonal timing is different. Over the last few years, he has observed a trend toward a wet spring. But while Mother Nature heads in a different direction the snowplow sign stays put.

That is one of the challenges Jeff Rose faces. The local joke is “There’s nothing that eastern Oregon likes more than change.” But good change can and is happening in the Burns BLM District. Rose shares an anecdote about a friend in Wallowa County who told him that for years the Stockgrowers meetings were all about weaning weights, calves’ rate of gain. “Then salmon issues started to make the headlines. Now the conversation has shifted to riparian concerns. My riparian area is better than yours.” In Harney County, one rancher’s improved pasture, the result of implementing the latest new grazing practices, can become the incentive for others to follow suit. It’s that art and science thing again.

Jeff Rose’s hope is that the rate of positive change can accelerate enough to avoid the inflection point when radical solutions are the only option. This would be “unsettling economically, environmentally and socially,” he warns. He tries not to think about such things when he takes time off. He likes to go south, he tells me. I picture him in, maybe, Florida, shaded by palm trees, waves lapping on white sandy beaches. But no, Jeff and his family’s idea of “south” is to head south to Steens Mountain. Is that his favorite place in the high desert? “My favorite place is the whole thing, including the people. It’s contextual, a community thing. The high desert is one part of that. Part of a system that humans are also part of. I couldn’t do what I do without being part of that system.”