

Crooked River National Grassland

The Crooked River National Grassland is located in central Oregon, entirely within Jefferson County. Of 173,629 acres encompassed by the Grassland boundary, 111,379 acres are under Forest Service administration. Other lands are privately owned or under the administration of the BLM, State of Oregon, or Jefferson County.

The Grassland is traversed from north to south by State Highways 26 and 97. West of Highway 97, the country is a high plateau interrupted by steep canyons of the Deschutes River and its tributaries. East of Highway 97, the terrain is rolling hills and buttes. Elevations range from 2,241 feet at Madras to 5,108 feet atop Gray Butte. Steep canyons border the major drainages, including the Deschutes and Crooked Rivers, and Squaw and Willow Creeks. The Grassland lies within two sub-basins of the Deschutes River drainage system: the Middle Deschutes River and the Lower Crooked River.

It is believed that the Grassland was originally vegetated with bluebunch wheatgrass and Idaho fescue, along with sagebrush, rabbitbrush, bitterbrush, and juniper. Because much of the area was cultivated and the native vegetation removed during the homesteading era, it is difficult to determine the original vegetation patterns.

The climate of the Grassland is typical for central Oregon. Annual precipitation averages 10.5 inches, but higher elevations may receive 19 inches or more per year. High intensity rain storms are likely to occur during spring and summer months. The growing season averages 100 days. Temperatures are moderate throughout the year and may fluctuate greatly between day and night. Frost may occur any day of the year.

The area was first homesteaded in the 1880s and eventually 700 homesteads were established. But by the 1930s, inadequate rainfall and poor economic conditions had caused the farms to fail and the homesteaders to abandon their land. By 1935, Federal Land Banks and private mortgage banks had taken over 35 percent of the homesteads in foreclosures. The Federal Government then began to buy the land back from the remaining homesteaders under the authority of the Resettlement Administration and Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act.

Management of the land was transferred from the Soil Conservation Service to the Forest service in 1954. Originally known as the Central Oregon Land Utilization Project, the name was changed to the Crooked River National Grassland in 1960. Management direction states that "the National Grassland shall be administered under sound and progressive principles of land conservation and multiple use..." (36 CFR 213).

During the 1930s and early 1940s, many acres were seeded to provide ground cover and improve the bare ground situation that had resulted from plowing the land and attempting to raise grain. treated lands (approximately 63,000 acres) were planted to either crested wheatgrass or bearded wheatgrass. The native bluebunch wheatgrass proved impossible to restore. In the 1960s, many acres were reseeded and sprayed with herbicides to control shrubs. In the 1970s, reseeded was phased out and fire was introduced as a management tool. This management method continues today.

The Crooked River National Grassland is administered as a ranger district of the Ochoco National Forest and is the only national grassland in the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region. There are 19 national grasslands nationwide.

The Grassland is managed to promote the development of grassland agriculture and sustained yield management of the forage, fish and wildlife, timber, water, and recreation resources and to demonstrate sound and practical principles of land use. Since the beginning of the land utilization projects of the 1930s, improving range management and the forage resource has been a major goal.