

Chapter Nine The Falls City Community Resource Unit

Section One: Baseline Social and Economic Information

A. Community Description

Geographic Features

The Falls City Community Resource Unit takes in the upper reaches of the Revell, Gold, and Mill Creeks on the north just south of the Yamhill County line, the ridge of the coast range on the west, Fanna Ridge and Mount Sykes on the south, and the Luckiamute Creek west of Bridgeport on the east. The area is predominantly Siuslaw National Forest and BLM land, with a small amount of private land near the community of Falls City. Figure 25 contains a map of the area.

Settlement Patterns

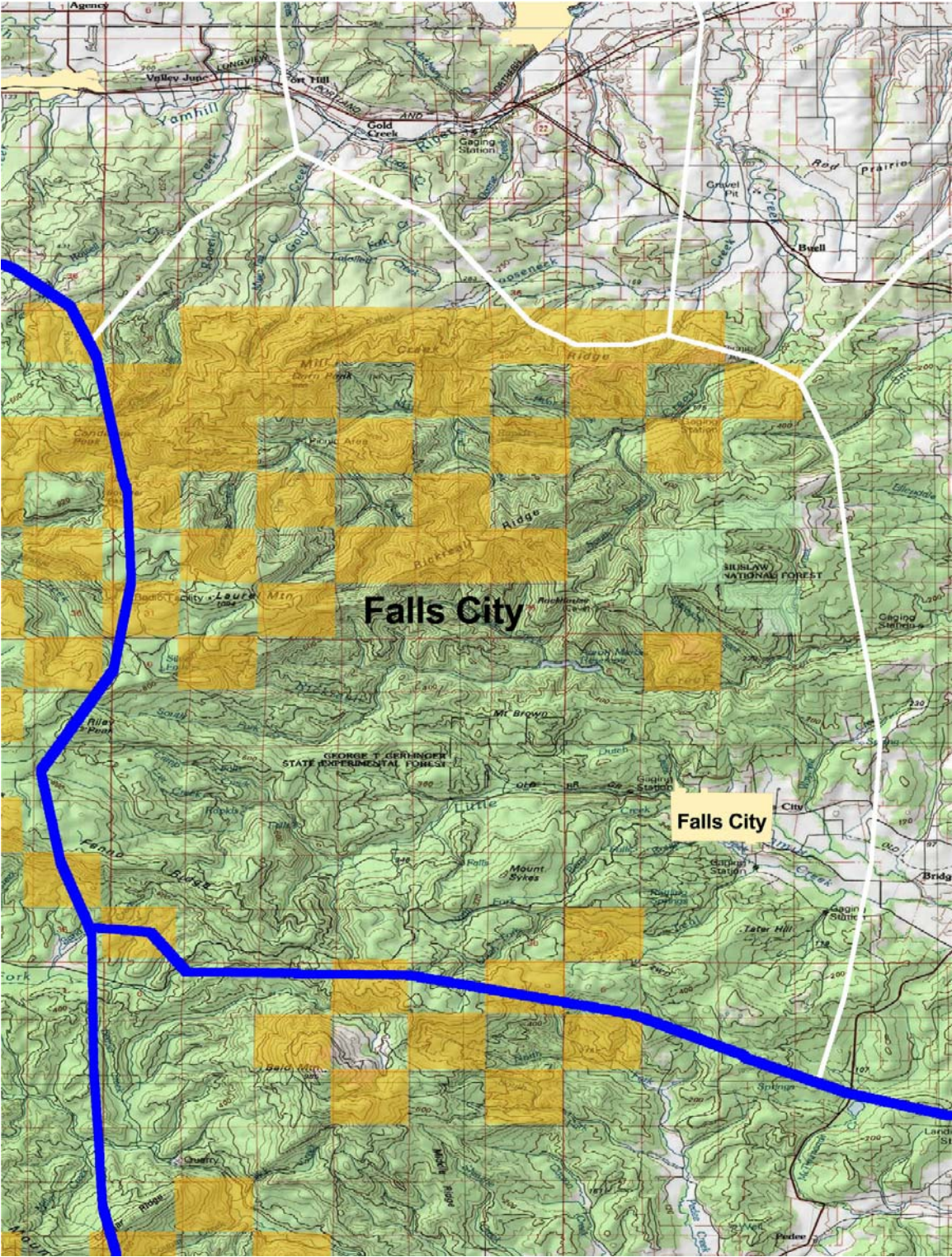
Falls City was incorporated in 1891. It had 839 people in 1990 and 966 in 2000, an increase of 13% (Census Data, Table Two).

Falls City lies at the "end of a dead end road." It was begun as an entrepreneurial town, settled as part of industrial-era timber operations. The mill and the railroad operated from 1890 to 1922 made it "the gem of Polk County." About 1000 people lived in the community in 1922 but when the mill was moved to Valsetz in 1930, the population dropped to 450, according to a local historian. Then it busted, "like other boom towns."

Fruit orchards scattered the valley until the early 20th Century. Hops were grown throughout the valley, which was a very communal activity. The whole town would gather to pick hops.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, a "new tribe" showed up—more welfare cases came into town and drugs became commonplace for the first time.

Figure 25
Map of the Falls City Community Resource Unit



Currently, the town's appearance is somewhat run down. The main road into town has huge potholes and many front yards display rusted equipment or cars. The main street area has a number of empty storefronts. There is one restaurant, a market, fire station, elementary school, high school, and a few parks. The land surrounding the community is large private timber companies. Beyond these lands is BLM land, much of which is landlocked by private holdings. The scenery around Falls City is exceptional (Figure 26).

"Falls City is gorgeous but needs help."

"I tended bar 20 years ago in Falls City. It was alive then. Now it's a bedroom for Dallas, Monmouth, and even Portland."

"One of the best things about Falls City is the swimming hole and rope swing."

Falls City residents are oriented more to Dallas than to Monmouth or Independence. Figure Two shows the falls near the town.

Publics

Long-timers are associated with logging and the timber industry, while newcomers are commuters or people that live with less in some way. Residents describe long-timers as being against growth and against new industry, with the perception that Falls City will cease to be if it grows. Newcomers are said to be "newcomers" until they've been in the community at least twenty years. Newcomers are rejected if they try too hard to "fix things."

"The types of people that live in Falls City are outlaws, hippies, religious freaks, transplants from California and artsy."

Networks

See Section Two.

Figure 26
Falls on the Luckiamute River Near Falls City



Work Routines

Logging trucks constantly drive through town. The presence of timber is still prevalent, though it is obvious that the community has been struck hard by the decline in timber sales. We were told that most of the people in Falls City connected to timber are involved in log truck driving.

A number of forest workers are gatherers of special forest products. Mushroom pickers believe their activity adds substantial revenues to the local economy. Mushroom pickers are almost exclusively people local to Falls City, Dallas, Monmouth, and Independence. The primary mushroom market is overseas.

"Mushroom picking is Christmas money." [That is, payment is inconsistent, usually low, and cannot be relied upon.]

One doctoral candidate who did her dissertation on commercial mushroom harvesting had these observations to make about the regulatory climate. The late 1980s marked the creation of regulations for mushroom pickers. They were created primarily out of two events happening around the same time.

First, the Laotians and Cambodians were entering Oregon and began to take up mushrooming in southwestern Oregon as a viable occupation for themselves. They chose southern Oregon because of the price of Matsutake mushrooms and because there weren't a lot of local pickers. The Laotians, especially, created a lot of worries because they were not careful with their cigarettes in the woods, left trash and so on. The presence of these groups caused "turf" tensions with locals. The media exaggerated claims of huge profits from mushroom harvesting.

Second, the timber receipts of the Forest Service were plummeting rapidly and the agency believed that permitting mushroom pickers could generate revenues. At the same time, concern grew about the environmental sustainability of mushroom harvesting.

One of the main points of this student's dissertation is that policies governing mushroom harvests were developed over the region, based on the southwest Oregon experience, and were not sensitive to important variations from area to area. In particular, the Willamette Valley has had a long history of mushroom picking on a small scale. The vast majority of pickers are local people from the rural areas who piecemeal out a living. For many of these people, it is not their only source of income but a substantial portion of it. Pickers use the term "pick down their crop" to refer to the practice of taking most of the crop. By picking down their crop and by keeping sites secret, Willamette pickers have been able to create a "home field advantage" that has successfully resisted intrusions by outsiders. The student also revealed that most central Oregon pickers live in the Willamette Valley and include central Oregon as part of their "turf."

Agriculture remains an activity that support livelihood for some.

"Communities are no longer dependent on agriculture, just individual families."

Newer residents commute to the urban areas of the region.

Support Services

Three community groups serve different functions. Neighborhood Watch is a "coalition of people who have had it with the drug dealers who are infecting our children" (www.fallscity.org). There is also the Falls City Garden Club and the Falls City Seniors.

The Churches are strong in the community, especially the Seventh Day Adventists and Methodists. City hall is used as a resource center by residents who come for information.

Every year a reunion is held for those who once lived in the ex-town of Valsetz. There is also an old-timers picnic held every year as well.

"It's hard to meet people unless you have kids. You used to meet people at the swimming hole and at picnics."

The Falls City Fire Department got special mention from residents as highly dedicated and important for the community.

"I was most impressed and very grateful [for emergency services from the Fire Department]."

Recreational Activities

See Section Three.

B. Themes and Citizen Issues Related to Community Life

Themes

"The old time residents are yielding power quietly."

"People who live in Falls City choose this life. They love it here. Residents are very protective of their town. Falls City will always be home."

"Falls City is a true democracy—rough and tumble."

"Today, no one knows each other. People don't live with the land anymore."

Citizen Issues Related to Community Life

Falls City recently lost its contract with the sheriff's office, and its recent levy attempt to fund law enforcement failed at the polls. At the moment, there is no police presence in Falls City. Neighborhood Watch has been active in filling the gap, but some citizens have complained that the group is over-zealous and intrusive.

"There is a serious criminal element here. Neighborhood Watch is a good answer but they are walking a tightrope. They're almost too nosy."

"The lack of law enforcement has burned out the town. It causes Falls City to get bad press—a bad image."

Falls City schools have one of the worst tardiness problems in the state. The problem is attributed to the long commute times of parents, who leave for work before school begins.

Falls City is currently undertaking a project to create a more attractive and safer north Main Street. The downtown revitalization project is underway, with the first phase to resurface Main Street, supported in part by tax dollars from timber companies who haul logs on the street. Curbs, gutters and sidewalks are being added for the first time. Community support is mixed. Some people believe that curbs and gutters are unnecessary. Artists are being sought to landscape some of downtown and one street corner in particular.

"There is a difference between growth and improvement." [City Hall in general provokes frustration and anger among many residents. While residents generally recognize that some things are getting done, the type of progress concerns them.]

"The town should do picnic facilities right next to the falls. Falls City needs to develop more if they expect to attract visitors."

There is nothing for kids to do, especially in the summer when school is out.

The city is investigating the possibility of developing hydropower resources.

Section Two: Communication Strategies

A. Informal Networks and Communication

Kids like to hang out at the bell at the fire station.

Mac's Pizzeria is a popular hang out for adults.

Falls City Market has a bulletin board used for posting community events.

Residents consider the Dallas Itemizer-Observer as their paper.

The churches are very popular and important to the town.

B. Formal Groups and Communication

Figure 27
Organizations With Interest in Public Lands in Falls City

Organization	Contact Information	Mission
Falls City	Bob Richardson Special Projects Assistant P.O. Box 310 Falls City, OR 97344 (503) 787-3631 FC_Projects@aol.com	Grant writing for youth programs; hydro-power feasibility; downtown revitalization
Neighborhood Watch	Calwill62@aol.com	Anti-drug; crime reporting and prevention
Luckiamute Watershed Council	Sean Burgett 810 Parry Rd. Falls City OR 97361 (541) 787-5016 Luckiamute57@yahoo.com	Watershed restoration

Section Three: The Public Lands Perspective

A. Uses of and Orientation to Public Lands

Local kids make use of a number of swimming holes. One of the favorites is the third trestle of the bridge heading out of town. They also like after school activities put on by the school district. Older kids like to "mud bog" with their four-wheel drive pickups but places at which this activity is permitted are getting hard to find.

"People like to camp in the summertime, but anymore, private land holders around Falls City are not allowing people to camp."

The Falls City High School offers a course in forest resource management that is considered a first step towards putting together a CAM (Certificate of Applied Mastery) certification program in resource management. The Superintendent at the High School is working with others to turn the school into a satellite for timber resource education. The goal of the district is to have each school specialize in some aspect of resource management. This effort has strong community involvement. Program people are looking for opportunities to do collaborative projects with the BLM and the Forest Service, as they have seen other schools do in other parts of the state. Evidently, the intermediate school received some funds for an after-school club that helps students maintain and enhance wildlife habitat.

"Across the street is a lot that was cut-over old growth that was reforested by the children of the town."

Firearm supplies are obtained in Sheridan or Willamina.

While residents have familiarity with BLM and the Oregon Department of Forestry, people do not relate to the Forest Service very much.

B. Themes, and Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

Themes

"A locked gate doesn't mean you can't use the land." Residents consider all the land around Falls City as somehow part of what they are, with use rights attached.

Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

Forest Management

"We don't like the clearcutting on private lands. It's not good for the forest."

"People ask all the time for information about Valley of the Giants, but BLM has never approached the City. It would be helpful if City Hall had more information about this area. Also, people have no idea whose land they are on—ownership maps would be great." [City Hall serves as the resource center in the community.]

Access

In this area, the use of gates has affected private land access more than public land but not exclusively. Many local people have made use of both public land and the large industrial timberlands for generations. In recent years, as the use of gates has increased, access into traditional areas, even private landholdings, has decreased. People also complained that restrictions to private lands have restricted access to public lands that lie beyond the private lands. In general, these issues seem to be proliferating and are at risk for becoming disruptive.

Shooting

"There used to be a shooting range in the basement of the high school but it closed to the public. Now, it's harder and harder to find a place to shoot."

Special Forest Products

A local family that has been prominent in mushroom gathering, buying and selling for twenty-five years was very appreciative of the chance to discuss their concerns and grateful that the agencies have made the effort to get out and talk to others. They had high interest in further discussion. Three generations of family members offered a list of issues related to federal management of nontimber forest products:

- BLM permits are too restrictive and difficult to obtain.
- Private and public gates keep mushroomers from being commercially viable;
- Logging practices have eliminated many renewable mushroom crops;
- Minors cannot be issued permits through the Forest Service.
- Indigent people have trouble raising the money for permits.
- Mushroomers believe that added fees are spurred by exaggerated profits in central Oregon that were reported by the media.
- Weekend pickers and hunters that also pick mushrooms have logistical difficulties getting permits.
- Global market volatility, peoples' capricious taste, and climate conditions make the mushroom profit margins vary substantially. Meanwhile the fees and regulations are constant and somewhat rigid.
- Restrictions lessen brokers' ability to compete with other eastern block countries.
- Burn area policies are unfair for commercial mushroomers.
- Too much energy is put into policing mushroomers. Practitioners feel belittled by this because it implies they are not concerned with the sustainability of the resource. They also feel enforcement is not effective in changing behavior—rather self-policing and education are more valued.

- Private timber companies are unwilling to negotiate with mushroom pickers on issues of access.
- Regulations cut against the independent spirit of many mushroom pickers.
- Native plant harvesting is a recent trend that this area has not fully exploited.

C. Management Opportunities

The BLM could provide the city government of Falls City with information about its resources, especially Valley of the Giants and ownership maps.

The Forest Service could explore the prospects of using the Rural Community Assistance program, or other programs, to assist Falls City with the development of its infrastructure.

People who grew up in this region have had long practice in dealing with gates and access issues because of the presence of large industrial timberland owners. As the Forest Service and the BLM begin grappling with these issues on a region-wide basis, stories from these local residents would provide ideas for how to structure management options culturally so that they would blend in and also work.

Local mushroomers, important for the livelihood of many in this area, have clear ideas for improving the responsiveness of permitting agencies. Dialogue will help bridge the differences in perspectives between pickers and regulators.

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