

Federal Lands Programs – BLM Roads

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Over the years, there have been many changes to what is now known as the Federal Lands Highway Program. For a period of time, the Vancouver office Bureau of Public Roads supported the Bureau of Land Management, constructing their timber access roads, and handling BLM road maintenance. In fact, when changes to our program caused a drop in work in the early 1970's, it was the generosity of BLM that ensured there was work for the Vancouver office.

Several retirees remembered our BLM program in terms of the storm during the winter of 1964-65. "It snowed here at least a foot," **Fred Rogers** recalled, both in the cities and in the mountains. Then it melted all at once. "That was the time that Portland was cut off by rail, by highway, by air," Fred said. "The John Day Bridge collapsed and killed a guy from Vancouver."

An Oregon DOT history in the WFLHD library records that the storm was exacerbated throughout the state by "8.5 inches of rain in five days, melting the higher than normal snow pack." State highway workers spent Christmas week making emergency repairs (ODOT, *A Chronological History of the Oregon Department of Transportation, 1899 to August 1993*).

The storm resulted in a lot of work for this office as well, both in design and construction. "Western Oregon, was hit hard," Fred added. He was sent to Coos Bay for three weeks and "the office sent **Jack Rickard**" to another district to assess the damage.

Vern Ford recalled that the Rogue River Road he'd surveyed in the 1950's was in its construction phase when the rains came. "In 1964 they were constructing a bridge across the mouth of the Illinois River. **Harold Davis** was the Project Engineer on that, and the 1964 flood came up." Part of the bridge had been constructed and "there was falsework there; they lost the whole bridge" in the flood, he said. "It just kept coming up. That river was phenomenal."

Lyle Renz also worked on direct federal construction in Oregon



The BLM Maintenance area, behind the large door at the left, above, was located where WFLHD Right-of-Way and Survey offices are now. Lyle Renz and Fred Rogers recalled that **Bill Maltby** was probably the last FHWA person supervising BLM road maintenance. He ended up going to work for BLM, but they remembered he returned for functions at FHWA. WFLHD Archives.

during that period. “I was an assistant Project Engineer and a Project Engineer for projects out on BLM roads between Roseburg and Coos Bay.”

He noted “That was when the construction for direct federal was in the Division....The BLM roads back in those days were under the jurisdiction of the BPR for maintenance as well as construction.”

The work Lyle did was “all on reconstruction after the 1964 floods – there was a lot of damage to the road system in the 1964 floods...and as a result of that, there was a lot of reconstruction of timber access roads.” Those roads, he said, were akin to the “central artery roads that BLM maintained for timber cutting.”

Lyle also took some time to describe the administrative structure of the direct federal program. “Direct federal construction actually was administered in the divisions.” On into the early 1970’s, even the construction supervisors “resided in the Divisions...before that effort came into Vancouver...”

“Design was done in Vancouver, essentially, and...locations and things like that were run out of Vancouver. The responsibility of the construction after award of contract was sent to the divisions. So the divisions essentially had the responsibility for getting it constructed. Project Engineers were assigned there, and they had a coordinator for that, and later construction supervisors were in charge of the various Project Engineers. Before the construction supervisor, the area engineers were actually in charge.”

Over the years, Lyle had several of those responsibilities, including coordinator and area engineer. “As the construction supervisor thing came along, I was... construction supervisor within my area to construct the forest highways. It was interesting work.”

At the time, the direct federal work force reported to the Region Office. Lyle recalled that “**Norm Woods** was the direct federal Project Engineer back then.” His office was in the Regional Office and he answered to the Regional Engineer, **Baird French**. Lyle recalled that **John Mors** sat in the Region Office, but held a position something like a deputy federal projects engineer. “Then I think he took Norm’s place when Norm retired, and I think he stayed in the Regional Office” before coming over to Vancouver.

By this time, BPR had been moved from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Transportation and had been renamed Federal Highway Administration.

Jim Hall was working in headquarters and was right in the middle of the action. “In 1973 or 1974, FHWA made the decision to transfer the forest highways design and construction over to the states. Just after that decision, 1974, I became the Chief of (Federal Lands) Division in headquarters, and suddenly I had...more than 1,100 (employees)...with no way to pay them.”

The forest highways program had essentially been created when the Office of Public Road Inquiries was created within the Department of Agriculture in 1905. At that time, Jim said, “They took the Forest Service budget for roads, which was forest development roads and trails, they divided it exactly in half and they gave half to the Forest Service for administrative roads in the forests, and they gave half...to the Office of Public Roads...for use on roads that serve national forests.”

The program had been with the FHWA and its predecessor agencies for over 65 years, but, Jim said, “The decision was made...I couldn’t tell them they were wrong, but I wanted that program back. So I started trying to figure out how do you do that.”

Jim talked to contacts in other agencies. “I had several friends in state highway departments, and I told them, ‘we’re going to assign work to you people, but we’re going to write regulations that give you less say on what gets done.’” He had met **Skip Anderson** of the Utah DOT at a Masters program in management at the University of Mississippi, and his friend was blunt: “Jim, that’s the stupidest idea you’ve ever come up with. If you think we’re going to build these roads and not have a say in what gets built – it’s just not going to happen.” Then he talked to the Forest Service, and they were “absolutely adamant that we had made a mistake.” The Forest Service, he said, “did not like having the states build it.”

“I had previous experience with the GAO,” Jim said, and had carpooled with a GAO employee in the group assigned to the DOT. As Jim described GAO’s job, “when Congress gives them something to do, they do it, but between times,” they may not have much to do.”

Some people from the GAO came by his office “one day when I was trying to solve this problem....and said, ‘We’re looking for work, we need a project.’ I didn’t try to influence them,” Jim said, but he explained the problem he’d been thinking about. “I said, ‘I’m dealing with this problem, I don’t know what the answer is. Who should be building the forest highways program?’”

Having already talked to the States and the Forest Service, “I had some idea of what might happen, but I was really surprised when their report came back and they said this is absolutely a stupid decision.” He said, “then my bosses said it’s ok to try to get the work program back.”

It was then 1978, and Jim took the position of Division Engineer in Vancouver, now out from under Region Office control, “and got the job of trying to get the work back. If it hadn’t been for the GAO analysis, we would never been able to design and construct the roads. It was the thing that saved Direct Federal, because we weren’t going to be able to feed these people.”

But until they could rebuild the forest highways program, he still had to find work for the over 150 people attached to the Vancouver office. “The one thing that saved us the first year I was here,” Jim said, was “we had a special deal with the BLM because we did the BLM road maintenance and (this office) had a very close relationship with them....

“We were building lots of little projects for BLM. They saw we had no money to pay our employees.” Jim said, that’s when “they did something that I had never (before) heard about.... They took their whole construction program and gave it to us for engineering. They built no projects” of their own, but the transfer of funds allowed the FHWA design staff to design “several projects into the future...It kept us in funds the first year, just out of the generosity of their hearts. I’ve always had a soft place for BLM because of that.”

What about the Forest Highway program the agency had given away? Jim said, “Gradually we started getting some of the forest highways projects back, but we had no construction work. We were getting projects back to design, but no work for the construction people, so our we were kind of lopsided. We started having design work, but still didn’t have any construction work.”

Just as the floods had brought work to the office in 1964, Mother Nature stepped in again in 1980 to help round out the program. Jim noted that “In May 1980, which was a year and a half after I came back, Mt. St. Helens blew. Suddenly we had work.”

He said he found it interesting how they came to get that work: “The Forest Service could’ve gone to anybody they wanted...to do the work,” but the forest engineer at Gifford Pinchot was **Mel Tiegen**, and he wanted FHWA to do the work. “Suddenly we had forest highways (again)....the work in Gifford Pinchot was just the shot we needed to survive.

“By the time we got finished with that, we had the forest highways work back in Region 10. Then the Washington Office transferred Montana to us...which gave us all the work in Montana...basically Glacier National Park, the roads to missile base sites, and the forest highways program....In addition to that, the Washington Office transferred Yellowstone and Teton National Parks to us which had huge road programs in the planning. Once we had all of those things in place, we had a fairly decent program.”



A motor grader works on a missile base road in Montana. WFLHD Construction Photo Archives.

Lyle Renz did most of his Federal Lands work from the Division Office in Salem. He moved into the Federal-aid arena in 1971 and retired from the Illinois Division as Division Administrator in 1994. Jim Hall started his FHWA career in the Washington Office before coming to Vancouver as Division Engineer. Fred Rogers and Vern Ford both spent their careers in WFLHD.

If you have comments or stories to share about the BLM work done by WFLHD or other stories to share, please email me at marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.

-- Marili Green Reilly