

Chapter 26 The Fern Ridge Community Resource Unit

Section One: Baseline Social and Economic Information

A. Community Description

Geographic Features

The Fern Ridge Community Resource Unit is the most western area of the South Willamette HRU. It includes the communities of Veneta, Elmira, Noti, and Crow. The boundary extends on the north past Richardson Butte, proceeds west south of Swamp Creek to the western line, proceeds south along the crest of the coastline range, goes east just south of the Lane County line to include Smith River, and goes north to exclude Lorane and Gillespie Corners and bifurcates Fern Ridge Lake between Veneta and Eugene. Figure 78 shows a map of this area. This is an area of gently rolling hills, dispersed rural settlement, and flat valley floors. The area is united by long-standing social and family ties with a sizeable overlay of recent newcomers.

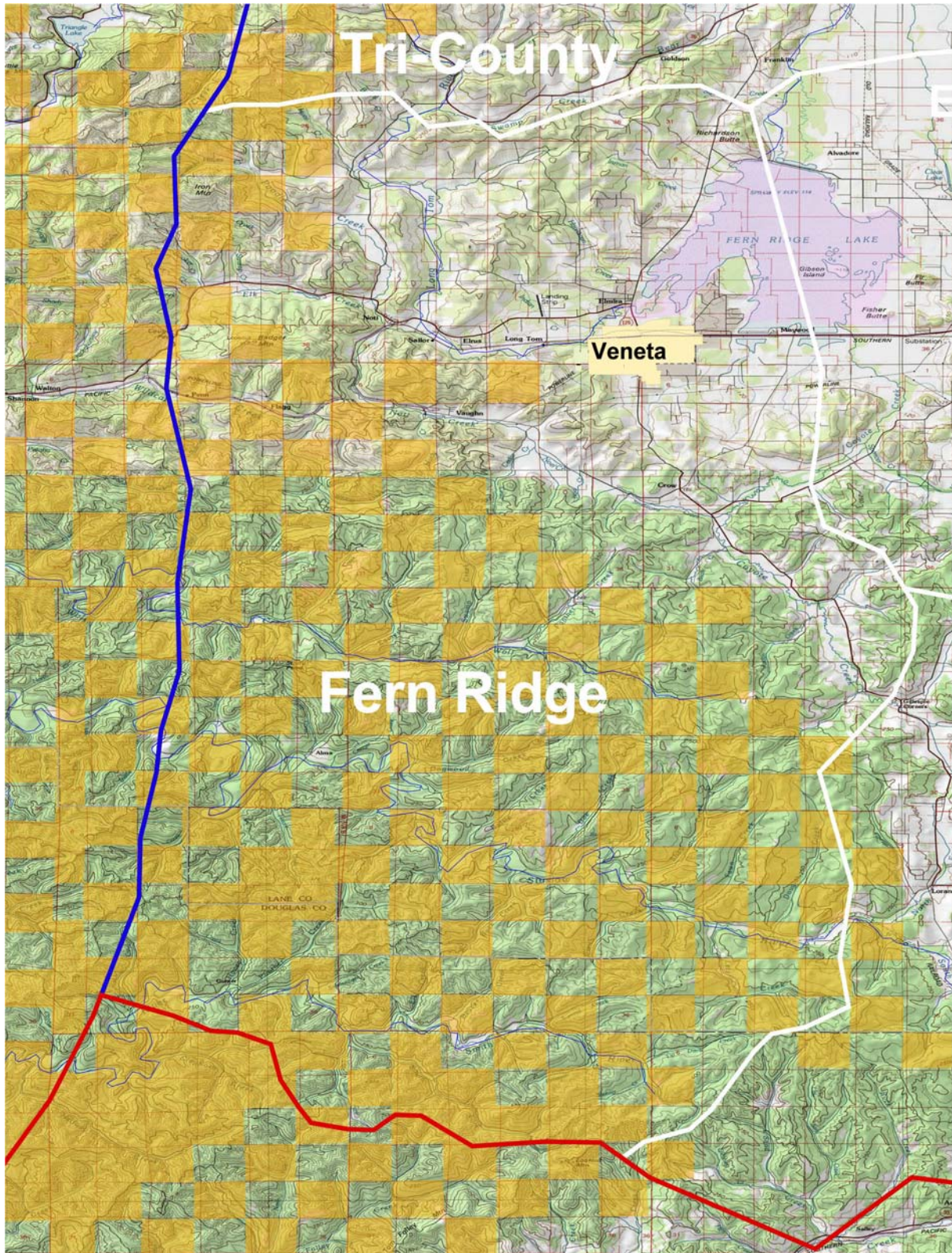
"Family ties go to Noti, but not past Walton. The tunnel at Walton is probably the limit."

"Schools that have been consolidated over time have probably created the most association between people here."

Settlement Patterns

The Fern Ridge area was settled by virtue of the Applegate Trail that skirts the western edge of the Willamette River Valley, which is approximated today by the Territorial Highway. The Trail was a major thoroughfare for the supply of California's markets from early Oregon development. The area now supplies a labor force for the urban job markets, as commuting has become one of the major economic strategies.

Figure 78
Map of the Fern Ridge Community Resource Unit



Elmira was first known as Duckworth, whose namesake took a land claim west of the Applegate Trail in 1852. It had a variety of water-powered mills and sawmills in its early days, and it was the center of the area's school system for many years through the 1950s.

Crow, a small settlement south of Veneta, was also named for a settler and was known for orchards and dairies. It is the headquarters of the Crow-Applegate-Lorane School District. Noti was a stop along the stagecoach run and was a rest stop for mail carriers and travelers (Fern Ridge Business Directory, Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce, City of Veneta, 2002-2003).

Veneta was a late-comer in town development. It was originally platted in 1912 by Edward Hunter in anticipation of the coming railroad. Mr. Hunter named the community after his daughter, Veneta, who recently passed away. After the railroad arrived, hardware, furniture, a grocery store, and hotel soon followed the early sawmills. The first sawmill was begun in 1917. After the stock market crash of 1929, timber never again played the dominant role that it did, although timber management companies continued to base the operations in the community. Ellmaker and Inmans are important family names in Veneta.

In 1942, the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the Long Tom River to control flooding, turning the large, marshy lowlands into Fern Ridge Reservoir, and creating fishing, boating and swimming opportunities.

The City of Veneta was incorporated in 1962 in order to create a centralized water system. Veneta had 2523 people in 1990 and 2755 people in 2000, an increase of 8% (Census Data, Table Seven)

Settlement in the Fern Ridge area has always been rural in character. Dispersed and small town settlement was the hallmark of most of its history. After the development of the Fern Ridge Reservoir, the housing areas that developed to its west were a bit more suburban but the country flavor still dominates. The blending of the old and the new is evident in this residential area, as the older, dispersed homes became surrounded by newer and higher density homes. The area is also characterized by many modular and mobile homes.

It has only been in the last generation that urban centers have been developing, as Veneta and Elmira have oriented commercial activity to the highway and commuting has become the dominant economic strategy. A new Bi-Mart in Veneta and new mini-malls along the highway are signs of changing settlement in the unit.

The City of Veneta has been experiencing many requests for subdivision development and many expect the community to grow rapidly. The growth is likely to be connected to the Eugene/Springfield labor market and not to any local job base.

Publics

Fern Ridge has many long-term families with several generations of history in the area. Timber families are still a strong element of community life. In recent years, commuters have generated housing demand and these families represent the newest element in the community. The retail business public in Fern Ridge is growing.

Networks

See Section Two.

Work Routines

Two lumber mills in Noti, Swanson Brothers, and Swanson-Superior Forest Products, are still active in the area. They employ 60 workers and 120 workers, respectively. Swanson Brothers began in 1937. One is a second growth mill that runs 4 ten hour shifts.

"As kids, we took for granted we'd be working in the mills."

"In 1925, the hill behind my mother's kitchen was logged. It wasn't planted and I lived to see it logged again. That was in '92, before she died."

Veneta has limited commercial and industrial facilities, limiting the tax base and assuring its status as bedroom community to the larger Eugene/Springfield metropolitan area. One estimate is that 85% of the area's workforce commutes to jobs outside the area (Fern Ridge Business Directory, Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce, City of Veneta, 2002-2003).

One of the City's goals is to balance the job/housing ratio by creating a local employment base. It sees itself as the primary service area for the Fern Ridge area, including the Fern Ridge Reservoir. Job growth is expected in retail trade and services, real estate, education, government, and construction. Veneta also supports home-based businesses as a policy for economic development, estimating that 5% of total jobs fall into this category (Veneta Comprehensive Plan, Ordinance #416, 2000).

Much of Veneta's commercial activity has moved from its old downtown to the West Lane Center, along Highway 126, reflecting the increased importance of car traffic to the local economy. The old downtown has many closed businesses and buildings in disrepair. In the old days, Elliot's Store was very well known in the region for carrying items not carried by others.

"If you couldn't find something in Eugene, you went out to Elliotts."

Oregon Dome Inc. (www.domes.com) is located near Veneta, and vineyards and nurseries dot the countryside.

"My kids all stayed here and they're all doing different things. Now people drive to town for work. A lot of people survive with a little of this and a little of that."

"There are many long-term families in this area."

Support Services

For 32 years, Fern Ridge has been the site of the Oregon Country Fair, a hippie-oriented, counter-culture event of colorful clothing, arts, crafts, music and food. The event attracted 44,000 people in 2001 (Fern Ridge Business Directory, Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce, City of Veneta, 2002-2003).

In 2001, a community risk assessment was compiled for the City of Veneta by the Lane Council of Governments. The study concluded that youth of the area are in need of greater services than are currently provided. The City of Veneta has purchased a 2.5 acre lot that will be the site for a proposed Territorial Park and Youth Center. The project responds to the needs expressed in the community for positive outlets for the community's youths. There is also an informal network of people in the community involved in youth sports.

When asked about local successes, residents pointed to the new Fern Ridge Library that was created through a community-based effort (Figure 79).

Figure 79
The Fern Ridge Library in Veneta



Zumwalt Park located by Fern Ridge Reservoir, was developed by the Corps of Engineers and is administered by Lane County Parks. Interpretive signs

point to the nearby Applegate Trail and its role in fostering early settlement.

The Applegate Trail Museum is housed in a former school that was moved from Spencer to Crow. From there, it was moved to Veneta in hopes of attracting more volunteers for the museum. The museum founder, Virginia Nelson, was an Applegate descendant.

The rural schools of the area continue to struggle to maintain enrollments and funding. The Crow-Applegate-Lorane School District has to close a school this year and send 7th and 8th graders to Crow High School. That school has a capacity of 350 but attendance is only about 140.

The Fern Ridge Community Partnership is a local non-profit organization devoted to youth issues, family support and community livability. Just three years old, they are a group of five. They run the "Peer Court" program in both Crow and Elmira High Schools for youth involved in reckless burning, trespass, vandalism, and the like. The Partnership through its "Freedom Road" also takes youth to the state prison to inhibit delinquent tendency. Recently, the Partnership has proposed a two-acre skate park and youth center that a local youth activist is spearheading, with city and community support.

Recreational Activities

See Section Three.

B. Citizen Issues Related to Community Life

Youth

"We are lacking services here for kids. There just isn't enough for what we're dealing with."

"Kids have parties out at the landings [old logging landings]. We lose one senior a year to alcohol-related traffic accidents. Kids here are in high poverty. The schools lost their mental health counselors."

Growth and Development

"Veneta has the potential to boom. The limit has been the water and sewer moratorium, but that has been lifted. Not everybody wants growth."

Section Two: Communication Strategies

A. Informal Networks and Communication

Dixie's Too Café is located two miles east of Veneta and is well-used especially by long-term and retired local people.

Violet Shafer is a long-time resident with knowledge of local history.

B. Formal Groups and Communication

Figure 80
Organizations With Interest in Public Lands in the Fern Ridge Area

Organization	Contact Information	Mission
Fern Ridge Community Partnership	Doug Perry (541) 935-2226	Youth issues; family support; community livability
Long Tom Watershed Council	Dana Erickson (541) 683-6578	Watershed restoration
Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce	Frankie Hiatt P.O. Box 335 Veneta, OR 97487 (541) 935-3950 hiatts123@aol.com	

Section Three: The Public Lands Perspective

A. Uses of and Orientation to Public Lands

Fern Ridge Reservoir is the site for boat races from both local and national interests. It has several day use areas, overnight camping, and two public marinas. The Eugene Yacht Club and the marinas sponsor major boat racing events. The adjoining wetlands are popular for wildlife viewing. The lake reportedly gets a million visitors a year.

One of the goals of Veneta's Comprehensive Plan is long-term sustainable development, emphasizing the protection of wildlife habitat and wetlands, while trying to provide recreation, education, and aesthetic opportunities for residents. A recent inventory of natural resources has been accepted by the City (Veneta Comprehensive Plan, Ordinance #416, 2000).

Lane County Fire District #1 is housed in Veneta. It has 7 career employees and over 50 volunteers but the fire chief stated their level of service is not adequate for the area. The district works "hand in glove" with the Oregon Department of Forestry in fire prevention activities with local landowners, and with BLM.

"Two years ago, BLM asked us to standby for emergency because of a tree sitter in a timber sale, and we did."

Residents reported that public road closures have not occurred much in this area. Industrial lands are plentiful. Roseboro and Swanson Brothers are industrial landowners in the area, and the State Department of Forestry manages several state parcels as well.

"Most companies try to keep roads open for PR [public relations] purposes unless the fire risk is high or they are logging in a block. It's hard to do closures in the checkerboard area."

ODF has a large office in Veneta and strong ties with the Forest Service and BLM. By contract, the office is in a fire protection agreement with BLM.

ODF staff provide education on fire prevention, they have people on patrol, they issue permits, and talk with campers. ODF also trains personnel from rural fire districts, most of whom are volunteers. ODF staff reportedly rotate less than BLM and have long-standing ties with many families in this area. Private and industrial landowners form the basis of the ODF board and fire program. ODF offers technical assistance to local watershed councils, and because of the Forestry Practices Act, assists others on water quality issues.

"We coordinate on equipment, make sure we communicate. We worked with them [BLM] on their prescribed fire program in the 1970s but the goals today are more nuanced—more detailed and individual."

C. Themes and Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

Themes

"We are an outdoor community." Residents commented that outdoor living is part of everyday life and part of the reason they stay in the Fern Ridge area. In the past, the outdoor lifestyle was expressed in work routines, as in timber and wood products production work. Today, the outdoor value is more expressed in recreation activities.

"My family goes to Florence, Whittaker Creek. We're not too snow oriented, so we don't go to the Cascades as much."

Citizen Issues Related to Natural Resource Management

Recreation

"The dune buggies and vehicles have taken over [at the Oregon Dunes]. There's nowhere for people to walk who aren't riding. I grew up going to the dunes, playing in sands, enjoying them without riding. I won't take my daughter to play there now." [Woman in her twenties]

"You pay through your teeth now. There is no free use of anything anymore, whether for picnics or hiking. You pay a fee at trailheads. You go for a picnic and pay a fee."

"Environmentalists go too far. My message to the Forest Service is, 'Don't let the radicals take over. Keep a common sense approach.'"

Forest Management

"The checkerboard areas make it hard to do prescribed fires. Most fire prevention is to educate the public. Fire parties with kids is one of our biggest fire risks." [ODF staff]

Watershed Councils

"The watershed councils are a little messy. Sometimes I think they should just give the money to agencies and tell them what job to do. They say education is the purpose, but I haven't seen the hoped for spinoffs. We still need law enforcement; we still have complaints."

C. Management Opportunities

The reduced timber sale activity of the Forest Service and BLM has also reduced contact with ODF. Now most contact between these agencies occurs with fire people. Still it seems that ODF is a well-regarded agency in this area that has a close-to-the-ground relationship with many rural people. The Forest Service and BLM could utilize these relationships for educational purposes related to new programs and initiatives.

The watershed councils can be supported by participation, funding, grant writing assistance, technical support, and leadership.

Youth activists in the community were very interested in the idea of linking youth activities to watershed restoration activities of the Watershed Council. These are relationships the natural resource agencies could help foster.

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