

FIRE DAMAGE: Road will not open till after next winter

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underbrush has been occurring for thousands of years. When humans choose to live in the wildland-urban interface, then human intercedents like prescribed burns become necessary to save lives and property when forest fires start.

The challenging job for the U. S. Forest Service is to maintain the balance between nature doing what it does, and human interaction with nature as people live and recreate close to and in the national forest. The very thing that makes Sisters such a special place to live is also capable of creating public safety hazards and economic hardship when forest fires strike.

“The money set aside for fire suppression in most years is not adequate,” said Jean Nelson-Dean, public affairs officer for the Deschutes National Forest. And so, “fire borrowing” takes place with money from other areas like vegetation management and wildlife going to cover suppression costs. Nelson-Dean said efforts are being made to have forest fires treated like other natural disasters such as

hurricanes and floods.

It’s easy to be an armchair quarterback when fires start in the wilderness. But being on the front lines and making the difficult decision requires a wealth of knowledge and experience not possessed by the average citizen. When the Milli Fire started on August 10 as the result of lightning strikes, many people reiterated a persistent myth that “the Forest Service just lets fires burn in the wilderness.” That is actually not their policy.

From the time a fire is first spotted, fire managers and personnel are working on it. Many different decisions are required, taking into account the fire’s location, firefighter safety, weather conditions, number of other active fires, resource and manpower availability, public safety, and political considerations.

There are hundreds of pieces in play across the nation at any given time when a fire starts on the Sisters Ranger District (see “How did the Milli fire get so big?” *The Nugget*, September 20).

Even before the Milli Fire was completely contained, work had already begun on rehabbing the areas impacted by firefighting efforts. During cleanup the Forest Service also takes into account cultural or historical sites in the area,



PHOTO BY GARY MILLER

Hwy. 242 on the McKenzie Pass suffered significant fire damage to both the road and the scenic corridor during the Milli Fire, resulting in extensive hazard-tree removal and repairs by the USFS and ODOT.

sensitive plants, and wildlife. The old Santiam Wagon Road runs parallel to Highway 242 in places and crosses it in several locations. Attempts were made to avoid impact on the historic road when conducting cleanup.

The Oregon Department of Transportation asked the Forest Service to assess potential hazards along Highway 242. They looked at the steepness of the slopes next to the highway and the condition of the trees 100 feet out from either side of the road. They surveyed thousands of trees, taking into consideration tree height, amount of burn, predominant prevailing winds in

the area, amount of tree lean over the highway, and weakened roots.

According to Amy Tinderholt, acting Sisters District Ranger, the fire and the necessary burnout operations that kept the fire from reaching Black Butte Ranch impacted seven miles of highway. Thirteen-and-a-half miles of highway are being treated, involving substantial work.

Traveling up to Windy Point, the varying level of the fire’s intensity is evident, with some areas completely unburned (12 percent of the fire footprint), 38 percent with low impact, 38 percent moderately impacted, and the

highest intensity fire areas devoid of any live vegetation (12 percent).

The trees that have burned lower branches with brown needles and a healthy green crown will usually survive. It will actually be better prepared for another fire because the healthy crown is higher and the brush has been burned away. The same is true in prescribed burns. Right after the burn, trees may look dead, but if the crown is green it will usually survive and be more resilient, with fewer fuels around it.

For the past three weeks,

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