

Burning season on the way in Sisters

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Some drippy spring weather has delayed things a bit, but fire managers will soon touch off a series of prescribed burns across Sisters Country.

Fuels Technician Jeff Crawford told *The Nugget* that a total of about 1,100 acres will be treated with prescribed fire in a dual effort to improve forest health and to provide strategic breaks in the landscape to help fight wildfire.

Fire is a natural part of the Sisters Country landscape, as described by Dr. Paul Hessburg in a presentation titled “The Era of Megafires,” held in Sisters last month.

“Forests are supposed to be patchy, with areas of dense conifer, and then areas of bare exposed landscape,” said Hessburg.

The topography, elevation, and weather all work together to shape the forest and help decide when and where fires occur. With an increase in the density of forests, fire is becoming more intense and hotter because the undergrowth is not being regularly burned out in low-intensity fire.

Prescribed burning is designed to provide that healthy level of low-intensity fire.

And those areas of more open landscape in the forest can be critical to fighting wildfires when they break out. That is why most of the burning projects are planned near the “interface” areas on the west side of Sisters, where local communities

push out into the forest.

“These burns are not just happening in a vacuum,” Crawford said. “They’re strategically placed.”

Crawford noted that areas treated by prescribed burns in recent years came into play last year during the Milli Fire, which burned over 24,000 acres and inundated Sisters with smoke for weeks in August and September.

“They turned out to be the first anchor points for Milli,” he said.

The public often looks askance at setting the forest alight on purpose. People don’t like the smoke, especially when it comes on the first pristine days of the spring season, and they don’t like seeing the black ground and brown pine needles left behind.

Several Facebook posts after the Sisters Ranger District announced burning plans complained of smoke and “making the forest ugly.”

Crawford acknowledged those concerns, though he says that Sisters is much more receptive to the value of burning than other communities in which he’s worked.

“I think folks understand, to a large extent,” he said.

The impact on the landscape is temporary, he noted,

though “temporary” for people and for landscape is a relative concept. What is healthy for the fire-adapted ponderosa forests of Sisters looks destructive and ugly to those of us who hike through them.

“Whenever we burn, there will be that year, two years when those effects will be visible on the ground,” he said.

Crawford noted that scenic corridors and values are taken into account in planning which areas are treated with fire.

“Obviously when we burn, we’re not looking to create an eyesore,” he said.

Of course, blazes like the Milli Fire do much greater and more long-term damage to larger areas of landscape than prescribed burning does.

A similar trade-off is in play regarding smoke.

Prescribed burning does produce smoke, though fire managers strive to burn in conditions where the smoke will dissipate and work to douse smoke-producing stumps and mop up the edges of fires. In Sisters, an inversion sometimes pushes prescribed fire smoke into town along the Trout Creek and Indian Ford Creek drainages overnight.

But the smoke from



PHOTO BY BRETT MILLER, BARRAGE STUDIOS

Window for burning operations in Sisters Country is narrow.

prescribed fire does not compare to the volume of dense smoke produced by a wildfire. The Milli Fire produced such heavy smoke for such a long period of time last summer that it had a negative effect on people’s health and struck a devastating blow to the local economy.

Dr. Hessburg insists that prescribed burning — along with strategic logging — is critical to restoring western forests to a healthy state. He puts the equation starkly: “How do you want your smoke?” Either fire managers treat the forests extensively and aggressively with fire, or we will continue to see the devastating impact of massive wildfires during

longer and longer fire seasons, influenced by a changing climate.

That longer fire season is affecting burning projects, Crawford acknowledged.

“We obviously don’t want to be burning during fire-season-like conditions,” Crawford said. “As a practitioner, the window (for prescribed burning) is getting harder to hit.”

Citizens can keep up with prescribed fire plans through a live map available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/webmaps/deschutes/cofms-rxfire/>.

Those who have particular sensitivities can contact the Sisters Ranger District to be placed on a list to be alerted to burning plans in advance.

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