



On the Fence

Wildfire and forest management: We can't control the weather, but we can reduce fuels

Recent deadly wildfires in California remind us that we also live in a fire-prone ecosystem and that we would be wise to do everything we can to ensure that wildfires don't enter our communities. But what can we really do about them? In this opinion piece, I'll talk about wildfires from the perspective of a scientist who lives in a fire-prone ecosystem, outline a couple things we can do and emphasize the need to work together.

Climate is changing, becoming mostly warmer and drier, and this sets the stage for longer and more intense fire seasons. So why not just continue to suppress wildfires, like we have for the past 80 years? We have the best firefighters in the world, and they extinguish more than 95 percent of ignitions every year before they grow to more than a few acres. Yet, unfortunately, each year some fires get away, mostly because they ignite under the most extreme weather conditions, and they quickly become too dangerous to suppress.

These are the fires that burn by far the most acreage and that pose a threat to rural communities in the interior western U.S. How can we better protect ourselves from these increasingly dangerous wildfires?

We can't control the weather, but we can decrease human-caused ignitions, and most important, we can reduce fuels. Using prescribed fire and machines, we can reduce surface fuel that contribute most to wildfire behavior.

Communities such as La Grande sit in the regional landscape like an island in a sea of forest. The scale of the problem in that forest is too vast for us to effectively reduce fuel everywhere using prescribed fire and machines. Yet if we concentrate our fuel reduction efforts in the land immediately surrounding our communities, and give nature more of a hand in managing the "sea of forest," we'll have our best chance of avoiding a catastrophic wildfire in our midst.

Fuel reduction can effectively reduce risk in the land around towns through a combination of logging and prescribed fire. If we harvest smaller trees and leave mostly larger pine and larch, we're removing stems that are most susceptible to being fuel for a wildfire. If we combine



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this with prescribed fire to consume logging slash, we create stands that can best moderate wildfire behavior. How do we accomplish this? Timber itself cannot pay for the fuel reduction effort because the most valuable timber has already been removed from the forest. Instead, federal land managers have enhanced authority, under the Agricultural Act of 2014, to enter into "stewardship contracts" with local businesses that can remove trees and reduce fuels.

While funding is required for these contracts to work, compared to the amount of money spent on wildfire suppression every year, we could fuel-treat the entire wildland-urban interface around La Grande for a fraction of the cost it would take to defend the city from a wildfire.

In addition, we can give nature a bigger, safer role by allowing more "cool" fires to burn. Federal agencies lead firefighting efforts and since 2009 have been given enhanced authority to use firefighting crews to reduce landscape fuels, especially on cooler, more manageable, early season fires. If we gradually begin to shift firefighting efforts to manage these cooler fires, letting them do more of the fuel reduction work, we will eventually create enough burned patches in the forest around us to slow down or render wildfires less severe, before they reach wildland-urban interfaces.

I suspect these ideas might be controversial, but if we build trust among all stakeholders, with the goal of reducing wildfire risk to our communities, we will have the best chance of avoiding the fate of many western U.S. towns that have experienced recent loss of property and life. In my view, we have little choice, especially living in a fire-prone ecosystem that's part of a warming world.

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Wildfire and forest management: Oregon should adopt California-style carbon forest plan

Fire season! Good news if you like fire, bad news if you like California. Comedian John Oliver made this joke on his comedy news podcast "The Bugle" the weekend that a wildfire forced my family to evacuate our Los Angeles suburb 11 years ago.

Wildfires have come to dominate the summer skies of the American West in recent decades, and they are not going away unless manmade and natural causes are addressed. Climate change is causing more severe fires, and humans are not applying the preventative maintenance necessary to mitigate the effects of increasingly lengthy fire seasons. California is leading the way in innovation for sustainable forest management, and Oregon needs to follow its model for the benefit of all residents, including our K-12 students.

California's "Carbon Forest Plan," released in May 2018, takes note of the causes of wildfires and their effects on humans, including poor air quality. Preventing intense fire seasons in the Golden State's future, however, will require the restoration of 15 million acres of forest land, 10 million acres of which is managed by the federal government. As of October 17, 54 percent of California land damaged by wildfires this year was owned by the federal government. In response, the Carbon Forest Plan advocates key steps to be taken in concert with the federal government in order to clear forests and raise revenue.

By 2020, California plans to expand forest restoration and fuel treatment efforts from 17,500 acres per year to 35,000 acres annually, before growing to 60,000 per year by 2020. Recognizing the federal government's need to get involved, California also named forest restoration goals for land owned by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Adopting a Carbon Forest Plan for Oregon offers the benefits of protecting the environment, maintaining healthy air quality, raising revenue for education and growing the state economy.

With the memory of this summer's fires still fresh on our minds, we can all see the benefits of better managing state



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lands. Under Article VIII of the state constitution, a large portion of Oregon's public lands are to be used to raised revenue for the Common School Fund under the trusteeship of the State Land Board composed of the governor, secretary of state, and state treasurer.

The revenue raised from harvesting excess timber will provide the dual benefits of better schools and economic growth because Article VIII also mandates that all timber logged on state lands be processed in Oregon (unless the state has a surplus of timber).

An additional component of California's plan involves supporting local governments in their management of urban forests, an approach that Oregon should replicate. Locally, citizens can participate in the City of La Grande appointed Community Landscape and Forestry Commission that "serves as an advocate of the City's urban forest and encourages improvements through long-term planning and policy development."

The Observer prints contact information for our elected officials in the opinion section, and individuals interested in refocusing Oregon's wildfire mitigation efforts should consider contacting state legislators and federal lawmakers to urge cooperation modeled on California's plan. As always, significant policy changes will not occur unless we get involved by contacting our elected officials or taking up leadership positions ourselves.

Fire season will never be completely eradicated, but through civic action we can make sure it is not bad news for people who like California, Oregon and the rest of our dear Pacific Northwest.

Alex is the former chair of the Eastern Oregon University College Republicans. A graduate of EOU and College of the Canyons in Valencia, California, he is a veteran of multiple local, state, and national campaigns, including Bud Pierce for Oregon Governor, and Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio for President.

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THE OBSERVER

An independent newspaper founded in 1896
(USPS 299-260)

The Observer reserves the right to adjust subscription rates by giving prepaid and mail subscribers 30 days notice. Periodicals postage paid at La Grande, Oregon 97850. Published Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays (except Dec. 25) by Western Communications Inc., 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850 (USPS 299-260)

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POSTMASTER
Send address changes to:
The Observer, 1406 Fifth St., La Grande, OR 97850
Periodicals postage paid at:
La Grande, Oregon 97850

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