

Local



Brian Addison / The Baker County Press

The image on the left was the scene pointed out by forester Arvid Andersen during a February trip up Dooley Mountain with reporter Brian Addison. To the right is the same area as it now looks after the Cornet Fire, depicting the uncanny accuracy of Andersen's prediction.

Cornet Fire aftermath

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It wasn't a crystal ball that Andersen looked into to draw his dire prediction but rather the knowledge and recognition of a large timber stand lacking in active forest management, greatly restricted by environmental regulations.

In February, Andersen drove to the south side of Dooley Mountain and pointed to overly dense timber stands and dead and dying trees infested with bark beetle and dwarf mistletoe speckling the landscape. At that time, he warned of the potential for catastrophic fire and impending forest devastation. Sadly, everything Andersen said in February played out through August on the public and private lands in the Dooley Mountain area.

As he drove the forest roads September 7, near the headwaters of Denny Creek, Cornet Creek, and Rancheria Creek, Andersen comes across areas of total devastation but also several areas where the fire moved through and did very little damage.

One of the lesser damaged areas, where he thinks the trees will likely recover, includes a five or ten-acre area where the USFS conducted a timber thinning project within the Stices Unit.

"I commend the Forest Service for this one," he said of the Stices Unit project. "They did a good job here. But, instead of just five or ten-acre units, why don't we do it with 100 or 500-acre units?"

Andersen drives down the forest road a ways and comes across another area where a thinning project was recently conducted. The project provided space between large trees resulting in fire resiliency with little or no permanent damage to the land with slightly scorched trees that will likely recover, he says.

Then Andersen points right across the road from the thinned area to a timber stand with no active management, an area where federal environmental regulations demand that no trees larger than 21-inches be cut and no trees cut within a 300-foot buffer zone near a stream. In this area the forest understory was thick, the trees grew close together with limbs overlapping and the fire roared through with intense heat causing total devastation. "Totally gone,"

Andersen says.

"How do you like your 21-inch rule now? How do you like your 300-foot buffer now?" he again mutters to himself in frustration over what he describes as a misguided effort of forest conservation through overly regulated forest management.

Andersen worked many years as a forester for Ellingson's lumber mills in Baker City through the 1980s and 1990s and drew-up timber sale contracts for Ellingson's on private and public lands. His experience with timber contracts and his eye as a timber cruiser leads him to realize the great potential and value of the trees burned in the Cornet Creek Fire.

"We have lemons so let's make lemonade," he says while assessing the dire situation. "You can make a profit on burned timber but you have to be timely about it. You can't wait two years from now."

He explains the urgency and need for expediency by the USFS in drawing and offering timber salvage contracts. If the trees are not harvested soon and left to the exposure of next summer's heat, the trees become susceptible to insect infestation and to the scourge of the Douglas fir and yellow pine, the blue stain fungus, according to Andersen.

"Right now these trees have almost full-value," he said. "Further into next summer the little tree'll be shot and the bigger trees will lose most of their value."

To give an estimated current value on the burnt timber, Andersen locates a large burned yellow pine next to the forest road recently cut by fire crews for safety reasons. The cut log shows the bark blackened by the fire but the wood inside unblemished by the flames.

After a few measurements with his timber cruising measuring rod, he determines the log at about 840 board-feet with a value of around \$400.

Andersen then begins to discuss the economic impact on a larger scale.

He pulls out his calculator and does a quick computation surmising that the area within the Cornet Creek Fire holds about 5,000 board feet of salvageable timber per acre. He then explains that a 25,000-acre timber salvage could produce 125 million board feet of lumber.

In terms of dollars, a 25,000-acre salvage translates to about \$12.5 million stumpage. Stumpage is defined as the amount of money the land owner can expect to profit after all labor expenses to harvest the timber have been paid.

On timber sales from federal land, 25-percent of the total stumpage comes back to local schools and county road departments, Andersen explains. On a 25,000 acre fire salvage timber sale, the local school district and county road department would reap the monetary reward of more than \$4 million, according to what Andersen calls a conservative estimate.

"For every million board feet of timber, that supports seven full-time jobs. Jobs that could support a family," he adds.

At its height of production, Ellingson's lumber mill in Baker City would run through about 50 to 55 million board-feet per year and employed up to 170 workers, according to Andersen. In addition to the mill workers, the local timber industry employed hundreds of foresters, loggers, contractors, and log-truck drivers.

At the top end of the estimate, Andersen sees up to 280-million board-feet of timber ready to be salvaged after the Cornet Creek Fire. "That's enough timber to run Ellingson's for five years," he said.

So, when Andersen looks at what is left after the Cornet Creek Fire, he sees opportunity for jobs and for money generated to fund schools and county departments. He also sees an aggressive timber salvage operation as an opportunity to protect the ground from further ecological damage.

There are other concerns and reasons to begin timber salvage beyond the rapidly decreasing value of the burned trees including the great potential for soil erosion on the steep, mountainous landscape. Part of the urgency in beginning a salvage effort, according to Andersen, is to protect the scorched, steep mountainous land from massive erosion after the coming winter snow-melt and rainfall.

"In a perfect world, the timber would be salvage-logged and then afterward hand-crews would lay down some of the burned trees on contour.

That would help hold the ground and help with soil erosion," said Andersen.

He explained the additional work of laying some of the remaining trees on contour could be added as a requirement of the contractor within the timber sale contracts.

Already, large rocks litter the highway creating a serious hazard for motorists. Without some effort to mitigate against soil erosion, Andersen points to a steep, scorched slope above the Dooley Mountain Highway (OR 245) and asks, "What's going to hold the soil back?"

Andersen tells the story of fire salvage projects on federal land after a large forest fire in Idaho in 2014 where work on the timber salvage began within days after the fire was out.

Elvin Carter, 86, once owned and operated one of the largest timber contracting businesses in Baker County. He recalls a time when the local private logging industry was called upon to bring their Caterpillar tractors to help contain forest fires before they could spread. He explained that his highly skilled CAT operators could doze a fire-line and contain a forest fire.

"Used to be, in the '70s and '80s, they called us immediately and they wanted our CATS," said Carter. "One CAT would take the place of 100 men."

Carter believes, even if timber salvage contracts were issued by the USFS in an urgent manner, that the local timber industry with the ability to process the timber no longer exists.

"There's a lot of salvage but where are you going to get the loggers and where are the mills," Carter asks rhetorically. "The industry's been shut down. There are only two or three little loggers left in this area and no mills. This town used to have three mills."

Carter Logging was in business operating out of Baker City for 28 years and at its height of operation employed 40 people.

Carter Logging's staff and business began to dwindle around 1985 when federal environmental regulations were enacted for the purpose of protecting spotted owl habitat.

The enacting of those environmental regulations and fewer timber sales administered by the USFS began to spell the end of the local timber industry and a huge chunk of the local economy. Carter Logging, and as

many as 20 other private logging contractors were able to hold on until 1994, when Congress dealt the final blow to timber harvest viability in eastern Oregon by enacting legislation referred to as "the Eastside Screens."

The Eastside Screens were enacted as a temporary 18-month measure to protect old growth trees. Those Eastside Screen regulations limits the size of tree cut on federal land by timber harvesters to 21-inches in diameter and also requires a buffer zone of 300-feet next to streams where no tree may be cut. Even though touted as a temporary measure in 1994, those Eastside Screens are still in place today some 20 years later.

"The 21-inch rule and the buffers around riparian areas were just made up and were not based on any scientific evidence," said Andersen.

When the Eastside Screen regulations were pending in 1994, some still remember hearing Elvin's son Tom Carter saying, "That's it, we're done. We won't be able to operate anymore." Not long after Tom's prophetic words, Carter Logging ceased operations and Tom left the logging industry to run a wilderness outfitting company in Idaho and Elvin bought a farm a couple miles north of Baker City. Those who worked for the Carter's were forced to settle into new careers.

Andersen remembers when the local timber industry was vibrant and he was well-employed by the Ellingson's mill. He has managed to stay in the timber industry as a private timber consultant but his work frequently forces him to travel away from his

family to earn a living.

"I've had to piece together a living to support my family," he said. "I don't have a retirement and no health insurance."

Elvin Carter was asked if he'd been out to look at the Cornet Creek Fire aftermath. "No I haven't been out. I'm just sick of what happened," he answered.

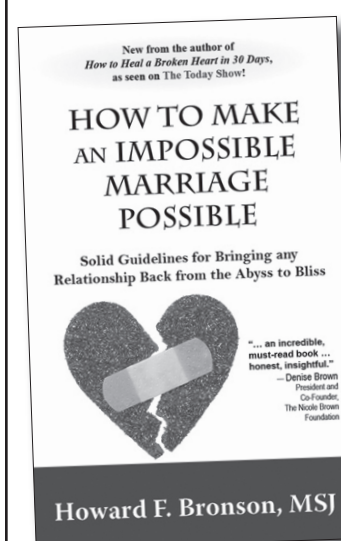
USFS Wallowa-Whitman National Forest Public Affairs Officer Katy Gray offered a prepared statement describing the bureaucratic process when asked about the agency plan for timber salvage on the Cornet Creek Fire area.

"We're still working on the BAER (Burn Area Emergency Response). That is to look at post fire threats to human life, safety, property, and critical natural or cultural resources," Gray began.

"As they do that they will evaluate and look at everything like soil severity on specifically Forest Service grounds. Once that process is complete, the next step is to look at the trees. Take care of the BAER process then look at areas for potential salvage. The top of our priority list is to get those areas evaluated. I want to emphasize that we are working with our partners at ODF (Oregon Dept. of Forestry), NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service), FSA (United States Dept. of Agriculture Farm Service Agency), Baker County, and the BLM (Bureau of Land Management and that we are taking a comprehensive look at the entire area."

Questions to the agency about a timeline for timber salvage and the prospects for attracting timber contractors to bid on the projects went unanswered.

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