

Thinning our stands this year: Easy pickings, or not?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

Looks like we Applegaters dodged bullets during this summer's fire season, thanks to last winter's rains, no lightning, and no major human-caused fires. Hooray for us!

However, it's worth mentioning that many of the smaller fires in southwest Oregon this summer did experience *extreme* fire behavior due to high winds and dry vegetation. So with fire season declared over, I started looking at our trees to see what shape they were in and how busy my chainsaw and I might be this winter.

I did find that our trees had grown together a lot more than I'd realized, and I saw a lot of reproduction of madrones and oaks. (That equals more ladder fuels.) I was especially surprised at the extent of the Douglas fir mortality, given that we'd had over two dozen dead trees taken out last spring. This should make thinning easier, I grumbled; just cut down all the dead trees....

But then I read a couple of recent articles on bug and beetle kill across the west and I nixed that idea. For one thing, a large dead fir with no needles *does not* necessarily present a greater wildfire hazard than a large live fir tree! However, trees with dead, red needles or small dead trees are a different story! It's that old "fine fuels" issue that I've previously written about.

After a couple of questions to Max Bennett (our local Oregon State University Extension forester), I found a different focus for how to address our thinning: wildlife habitat! Max reminded me that many birds and small mammals use large dead trees or snags for seed storage or nesting (see Bird Explorer on page 11 for more information).

A worrier with a sometimes active imagination, I had to ask whether these bark beetles might move to other species of trees. Max said no. Then I asked him if there was any chance that other bad bugs and pests might find out that there is a "banquet" going on out here



Notice the gray-purple sap on this fir—a sure way to ID bark beetles!

and set up camp in our other tree species. "No, Sandy, not really," Max patiently replied. However, he went on to explain that several years of extreme drought and heat have caused stress and dieback in most local species of trees. And stress makes our forests *more* vulnerable to pests and pathogens.

So, our plan: keep some big fir snags, maybe a couple per acre, but *not* near the house or roads since snags are really dangerous if and when they fall! We'll remove the small dead fir trees for firewood. The rest of the thinning/

pruning is to maintain our defensible space and access, while keeping a *healthy* variety of the seven tree species that we have on our property.

Another of my initial questions for Max was whether there was a better time of year to limb up both conifers and hardwood trees such as oaks and madrones: fall, winter or spring? Max told me that the late summer through winter is better for conifers, while the hardwoods prefer the winter. Therefore, my polesaw, loppers, and I are shortly headed towards the conifers. After the holidays I can tackle the hardwoods.

Almost through planning my season of forest maintenance, I realized I still had a couple more questions for Max. This beetle kill was "bugging" me—I've found it equally in thinned and unthinned stands. Max told me that while thinning is not a panacea, it can help increase tree vigor and resistance to drought and insect problems. He also offered that Douglas fir growing below 3,500 feet elevation, on hot, dry south and western sites, or in shallow rocky or clay soils would definitely be at *higher risk* to drought stress and beetle epidemics.

And finally, all of that hardwood reproduction that I ignored for the past few years? As you can tell from the photo below, it can get out of hand if you don't stay on top of it! Max

said it didn't really matter whether I pulled out the long-handled loppers this fall, winter, or next spring, so I think I'll leave this chore until the spring.

I hope you found this interesting and helpful as you consider your winter tasks. And if you are wondering whether Max is still answering my emails and phone calls, the final answer is, yes!

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A fire hazard: large fir showing red needles and dead branches.



Oak and madrone reproduction will be ladder fuels by next summer.



Burn reminder

Before burning outdoors any time of year, check with your fire district to make sure that day is an official burn day and not a **NO** burn day.



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