

OPINIONS

River Right | How much is 'just right'?

BY TOM CARSTENS

Although kayakers relish the excitement of whitewater drops on our Oregon rivers, it wouldn't be the same without the backdrop of our beautiful forests. I can't imagine paddling through lands denuded of wildlife and tall trees.

I've just completed a camping tour of northern Europe and guess what? That pretty much describes much of the landscape there. Okay, they *do* have forests, but they have become small and patchy over the centuries. Our extensive publicly owned forests and the freedom to roam within them are an inspiration to our international visitors.

The idea of publicly owned forests was conceived over 100 years ago to provide a sustained yield of wood products for a rapidly expanding nation. While much of the rest of the country had already been cut up and the wood expended, this idea seemed to work well in the Pacific Northwest, where the climate promoted rapid tree growth and high yields. But in dry areas, like the Rogue Valley, natural tree replenishment tended to be very slow. Clear-cuts couldn't be sustained.

When public land agencies like the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) try to manage our dry-forest timber

harvests, they've got a tough job. The trees just don't grow back very fast. So timber sales, like Nedsbar, meet a lot of resistance from some of our neighbors, many of whom are passionate about stuff like wildlife habitat and recreation. You've been reading about this in the pages of this paper.

Well, in fact, there are differing viewpoints among our neighbors. You could distill these differences down to maybe three philosophies. Each has good points and bad points.

A few of our neighbors would like to forego timber sales altogether. Many question their viability, especially since there's been little or no research about the long-term effects of treated areas. Except to protect homes and infrastructure, they say, let nature take its course. A hot, wind-driven fire is going to move through an area, thinned or not. And even when the forest burns, its vitality returns fairly quickly.

Another group would like to see timber harvests return to more traditional levels. This would add employment in the wood-products industry and have positive repercussions throughout our beleaguered economy. Increased timber sales might enable restoration of federal timber payments to our dry-forest

counties, which could use the boost. Obviously, this would also be the first choice of industry, as it offers the most return on the expensive investment of equipment and logistics necessary to extract timber from the steep slopes of the Applegate. This option also tends to favor the removal of larger diameter trees, which invites protest.

A third group of us believe that, to mitigate fire danger, our forests need thinning, but not wholesale plunder. I think the BLM and USFS are trying to accommodate this philosophy, but it's a tough road. It's a "Goldilocks" problem: how much thinning is "just right"? Aggressive thinning, while commercially viable, opens up the overhead canopy to let in more sunlight. This promotes the growth of a tinderbox understory, which only exacerbates the danger. Light treatment, on the other hand, is difficult to pull off and still make a profit. How to find that happy medium? Or does it even exist?

The BLM tried to find that happy medium with the Nedsbar Sale, but pleased no one. A local mill received about 30 threatening letters, but intimidation appears not to have been a factor in the failure to attract bids. Unsurprisingly, it was



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economics. To its credit, BLM did try to accommodate both community and industry preferences in its offering. But, in the end, commercial representatives said the sale offered too little timber and too many restrictions to make it pay.

Timber harvests these days are high-cost, low-margin affairs. Unless our community can better dovetail our interests with those of industry, this will be a common outcome: no sale, no thinning, wasted tax dollars.

Could BLM broker collaboration between industry and community that might have a more favorable outcome? Yes, it turns out. The 2009 Bald Lick Sale was a commercial success that was not litigated. Admittedly, the actual harvest was whittled to less than 13 percent of what had been originally proposed, but the sale yielded more than twice its appraised value. It was close to "just right."

If this sort of collaborative effort could work then, it can work now. I say BLM should give it a shot.

See you on the river....

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Beetles, timber, and the BLM

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

Many in the Applegate have noticed the recent bark beetle mortality in the mountains that surround us—the brown trees are hard to miss. Beetle outbreaks are a natural process associated with drought cycles and warm winter conditions. The recent beetle mortality is likely to have numerous contributing factors, including climate change. Persistent drought and a lack of hard frost in the winter months serve to create conditions that allow increased beetle reproduction. Another factor appears to be elevation, with our lowest and driest sites sustaining more mortality. Drought-stressed trees are more susceptible to beetles; the lack of vigor means trees cannot successfully fend off beetle infestations.

Many also attribute the current beetle mortality to fire suppression and forest densification. This may be true in some locations, but another pattern is also emerging. When comparing past logging treatments in the Applegate Valley to patterns of current beetle mortality, many bark beetle mortality hotspots appear to be associated with timber sales conducted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the 1990s. These sales were commercial thinning operations implemented to reduce fuel loading and forest density, while increasing forest health and resilience to natural disturbances like fire and insects.

In many places it appears that the desired outcome has not been achieved.

Stands thinned to increase trees' resilience to insect mortality are heavily infested by bark beetles and suffering from particularly acute levels of mortality. In fact, many stands thinned for resilience are now the least resilient stands on the landscape, suffering the highest levels of mortality across the largest contiguous geographic area.

For instance, many of the stands on lower Ferris Gulch and lower Thompson Creek, where beetle mortality is most prominent, were commercially thinned in the 1990s in the Ferris Lane, Hinkle Gulch, Lower Thompson, and Middle Thompson Timber Sales. Likewise, on Little Applegate, the largest concentration of beetle mortality in the watershed is located in the Deming Gulch area and on the south-facing slopes above Buncom. These areas were thinned in the Grubby Sailor, Sterling Wolf, Buncom, and Sterling Sweeper Timber Sales. On Star Gulch, large concentrations of mortality can also be found in various relatively recent commercial-thinning units.

The Applegate Neighborhood Network is monitoring federal land timber sales in the Applegate Valley, and the pattern we have found is disturbing. Forests commercially thinned to supposedly increase resilience to both fire and insect infestations, while improving northern spotted owl habitat, are suffering from "accelerated overstory mortality," a condition in which large overstory trees and canopy cover levels decrease from mortality, while understory fuel loading increases and stands dry from exposure to increased sunlight and winds. We have documented these effects in the Little Applegate, Upper Applegate, Thompson Creek, Sterling Creek, Ferris Gulch, and other major

watersheds in the Applegate Valley that have been commercially thinned in the last 5 to 25 years. We are finding that the heavy removal of overstory canopy is creating undesirable effects in many treated stands. Some stands have suffered from blowdown in winter storms shortly after being heavily thinned; other stands are drying and becoming stressed, making them more susceptible to beetle outbreaks. Many stands subjected to heavy canopy removal are also filling in with dense understory fuel loads, dramatically increasing fire risk.

Although we do not have enough evidence at this point to prove that BLM logging treatments are entirely to blame for the recent beetle infestations, ample evidence does suggest that either the BLM logging treatments are not effective at reducing susceptibility to beetle outbreaks as claimed or they have actually decreased resilience to beetle outbreaks. One thing is exceptionally clear: the commercial treatments implemented did not reduce beetle mortality, sustain our forest habitats, or increase resilience to natural disturbance agents. Instead, they have done the opposite.

Meanwhile, BLM is busy with business as usual, promoting the Nedsbar Timber Sale and planning a new timber sale in the Middle Applegate. Always looking to increase the scope and scale of commercial logging, the BLM has not adequately analyzed the current impacts associated with commercial logging or conducted meaningful post-implementation monitoring of past BLM sales. The BLM optimistically claims to be increasing forest health and resilience; however, the reality on the ground is contrary to those claims.

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