

Upper Applegate Watershed planning and the Miller Complex Fire

BY DON BOUCHER



Burnt Peak Fire burning along Kinney Creek Road.

Lightning in mid-August ignited over 30 fires within the Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District. Ongoing fires across the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, including the Chetco Bar Fire and the High Cascades Complex, quickly overwhelmed firefighting resources. Of these 30-plus fires, all but five were quickly contained.

In late August an incident management team (IMT) arrived to help manage the fires, which were divided into east and west zones with the fires west of the Applegate River managed by the IMT as the Miller Complex, comprised of the larger Burnt Peak, Abney, and Creedence fires, as well as numerous small lightning fires. Fires on the east side were managed by a local team.

Within the Upper Applegate Watershed Restoration Project area, the Burnt Peak Fire burned approximately 4,600 acres in the Palmer and Kinney Creek drainages.

Based on the preliminary Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) report, an estimated four percent of the fire burned at a high severity, 28 percent at moderate severity, and 50 percent at low severity, while roughly 18 percent of the area within the perimeter of the fire was unburned. (The

BAER reports for all the fires are available at fs.usda.gov/rogue-siskiyou.) These numbers were estimated using a Burned Area Reflectance Classification (BARC) model, which is based on a satellite-derived map of post-fire conditions. BARC maps compare satellite images of near-infrared reflectance values to those of shortwave infrared reflectance values. Near-infrared light is largely reflected by healthy green vegetation, while shortwave infrared light is largely reflected by rock and bare soil.

Based on the preliminary BAER report, the US Forest Service (USFS) has determined several actions it could take to protect human life and property, to reduce or minimize threats to life and property, and to prevent unacceptable degradation to natural or cultural resources. For the Burnt Peak Fire, recommended actions include road-hazard signing, storm-proofing of roads in the burned areas, and patrolling the area after major storms to make sure drainage structures are functioning.

On August 1, the USFS distributed a scoping letter for the Upper Applegate Watershed Restoration Project (UAWRP) to interested parties, seeking comments

on proposed activities designed to address landscape resilience to disturbance and climate change. On September 7 we mailed a second notice, postponing the scoping deadline for the UAWRP due to ongoing fires in the Miller Complex, including the Burnt Peak Fire in the Upper Applegate Watershed. We wanted to delay scoping in order to take a close look at the fire and how it might affect the proposed action. Now that the Burnt Peak Fire has been contained, we are resuming the scoping. The revised deadline was November 22, 2017.

The proposed action would affect some areas within the Burnt Peak Fire perimeter: several units identified for prescribed burning (for oak and pine restoration), several units identified for noncommercial thinning (plantations), and 270 acres that fall within the Upper Applegate Road Hazardous Fuels Reduction project. The burn severity in most of these areas was low to moderate.

Although there may be minor modifications during implementation, the proposed activities that fall within

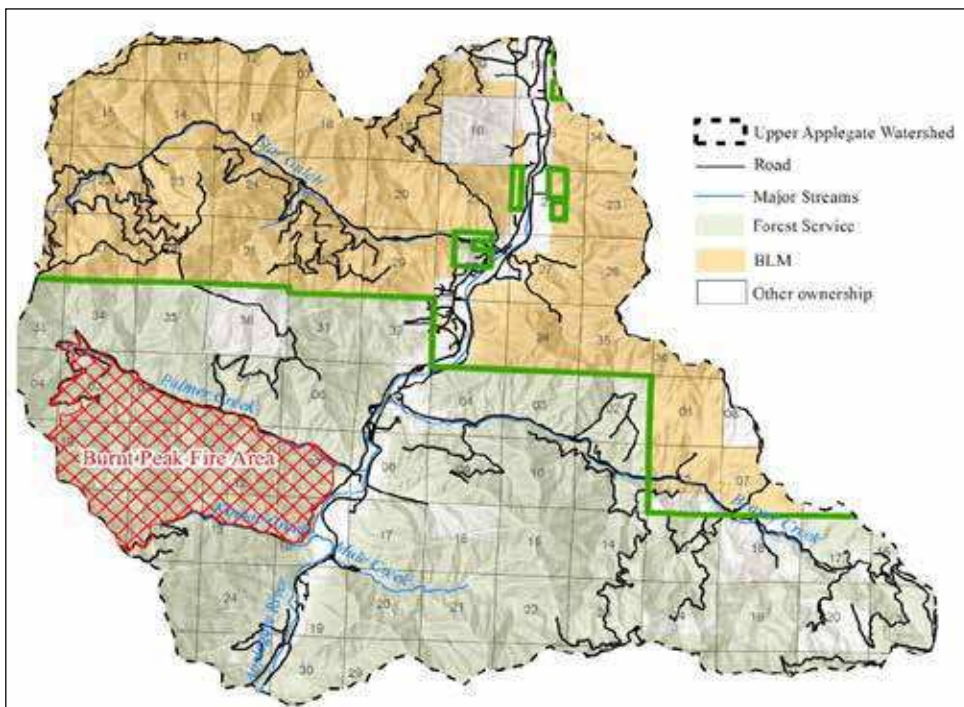
the burn perimeter are the same as in the original scoping project.

While the BAER report looks at emergency post-fire needs, the planning effort of the Upper Applegate Watershed offers an opportunity to look at long-term restoration needs within the burned area. Among actions that would answer those needs might be noncommercial thinning in patches of small trees scorched by the fire, prescribed fire to maintain burned areas, and the planting of native seeds or seedlings in areas with high-severity fire.

We look forward to having discussions with the community in regard to the fires. If you have questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me.

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The map on the left outlines the Burnt Peak Fire Area within the Upper Applegate Watershed Planning Area. The photo below shows the mixed-severity fire effects on the Burnt Peak Fire.



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