

OPINIONS

The forest for the trees: Global warming is here now

BY ALAN JOURNET

In the Winter 2017 *Applegater*, Alan Voetsch wrote a lengthy condemnation of climate science, climate scientists, and concerned individuals who understand and accept that science. Rather than respond to his criticisms of climate science, I will focus on one issue that is highly germane to the Applegate: wildfire.

Forest ecology reveals a connection between forest fire and global warming that is clear, convincing, and well understood. While many individuals blame regional fires either on environmental regulations or overly dense forests, the best predictors for forecasting a “severe” versus “normal” fire year—reported as long ago as 2006 in the journal *Science*—are the timing of spring snowmelt and temperature during the growing season. Trends in these factors are induced by global warming. According to Westerling et al. (2006, *Science*: 313 pp 940-943), the fire season in our western forests is now two and half months longer than in the 1970s.

A 2012 study reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* correlated biomass burning with climate trends over 3,000 years. This revealed that current climatic trends, combined with the twentieth-century imposition of fire suppression, have induced a vast fire deficit in our western forests.

Meanwhile, assessments by the US Forest Service of the impact of global warming on individual forest species have demonstrated that many of our ecologically and commercially important species are being compromised by global warming and the climate change it is causing. Specifically, Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, incense cedar, sugar pine, white fir, and Pacific madrone are likely to be compromised through the century. It appears that even oaks, though possibly able to exist over a broader geographic range, may not remain as healthy as they are today.

The smoke last summer during the fire season was certainly a problem for many area residents. However, while the trend over the final three decades of the last century and beyond indicates increasing large wildfire frequency, when we look even further back, we find fire frequency much higher than it has been recently.

Fire return interval (FRI) identifies how often fires occur in a given location. Studies for the dry forests of southern Oregon show that prior to fire suppression the median or average frequency varied between 5 to 14

or 8 to 20 years. Importantly, an FRI of 8 means that about 12.5 percent of the forest burns every year. Since the imposition of fire suppression, the FRI has shifted substantially—now any given location burns only once every century or more.

Although fire suppression has been successful, forest drying and warming from global warming is defeating that effort as risk rises again. Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest supervisor, Rob MacWhorter, recently reported that, in 2017, some 14.5 percent of the forest area burned, a value not much different from the 12.5 percent historic value at an eight-year FRI. Apparently the area burned in 2017 was consistent with the region’s pre-suppression history. Unless we collectively acknowledge global warming as the root cause of the increasing fire risk, it is difficult to imagine how we will ever curtail the fires.

But, as most Applegaters know, our dry forests are both fire-prone and fire-adapted. This means fire is essential for maintaining healthy forests. We also need to accept this reality and manage our forests in recognition of its importance.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Oregon’s forests are very effective at capturing and storing carbon. Our forests annually capture 50 percent of the greenhouse gases emitted statewide. Maintaining healthy forests provides huge benefits.

However, counterintuitively for many observers, forest fires don’t cause much carbon loss. This is not only because, for most of our forests, 50 percent or more of the carbon is underground and barely touched by fires, but also because fires are very patchy. High severity burns in 2017 affected only seven percent of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. On the other hand, carbon losses resulting from tree harvest—burning slash and mill waste and combustion of fuel used in harvesting and processing—are substantial.

The reality is that unless forest managers in the Applegate Valley and across the nation acknowledge that global warming is the primary factor influencing not just wildfires and smoke production in our forests, but also the general health and resilience of these forests, sound forest management will elude us.

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The future depends on us

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

Do you love the Applegate Valley for its natural beauty? Do you value the wildlands, old-growth forests, clear-running streams, and scenic vistas of the Applegate Valley? Although we all benefit from these important natural amenities, many of these values still exist in our watershed due to the hard work of local residents who have passionately advocated for their backyard forests, wildlands, and streams. The Applegate Valley has a long history of community-based collaboration, environmental activism, and advocacy for public lands.

Many of the places we know and love today have been protected by the efforts of local residents. For instance, a dam was once proposed at the confluence of Yale Creek and the Little Applegate River, major housing developments have been proposed in Ruch and Williams, timber sales and new roads were proposed across the face of Wagner Butte into the heart of what is now the Red Buttes Wilderness, and over the years, nearly every currently standing old forest on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land has been proposed for logging at least once. Due to the effort and determination of residents in this valley, we have much to appreciate and much to defend.

Given the political climate surrounding public lands and the policies of our current administration, the places we love and the places that define this beautiful valley will become increasingly threatened.

For example, the BLM has proposed large timber sales extending from Wilderville to Ruch across the Applegate Valley. The Grants Pass Resource Area has proposed the Savage Murphy Timber Sale, which would log hundreds of acres outside Wilderville, Murphy, and above North Applegate Road. The BLM has proposed to log a fire-adapted forest dominated by large, old trees directly adjacent to the proposed Applegate Ridge Trail (ART). The BLM is also proposing to construct two new roads directly on top of the proposed ART corridor, significantly impacting the trail’s scenic character. The ART is being developed by Applegate Trails Association and would connect Jacksonville to Grants Pass through BLM land. The trail could be a significant asset to our community and our economy, but the corridor must be protected from road-building and inappropriate logging.

The Ashland Resource Area has also recently proposed the Middle Applegate Timber Sale. The BLM has identified a large planning area sprawling across the Middle Applegate Valley from the mountains around Ruch to Thompson Creek, Humbug Creek, Slagle Creek, and portions of North Applegate. Although it



A view across Long Gulch from Wellington Butte in the Wellington Wildlands and the planning area for the Middle Applegate Timber Sale.

is unknown at this time what logging will be proposed, the planning area includes the beautiful Wellington Butte Roadless Area, the Enchanted Forest Trail, Billy Mountain, Old Blue, large sections of the proposed ART, and portions of the newly created East ART. We hope that BLM will focus on restoring previously impacted lands rather than damaging currently intact, old forests and roadless areas.

The Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest and BLM have been collaborating with local community members on a widely supported project in the Upper Applegate Valley. Although a final proposal and environmental assessment have not been developed, many in the community feel the forest thinning, prescribed fire, and restoration focus of the project is commendable. Many are also concerned by the controversial proposal to build new off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails in the Boaz Mountain Roadless Area above McKee Bridge and Eastside Road. The OHV development will impact important winter range habitat for a large population of black-tailed deer, degrade important native habitats, and impact nearby communities on Upper Applegate Road.

Meanwhile, on the Siskiyou Crest, near Cook and Green Pass, the Klamath National Forest has proposed to clear-cut 1,700 acres following the Miller Complex Fire. The project will log a previously uncut forest located within one-eighth of a mile of the Siskiyou Crest and the Pacific Crest Trail. The project is located adjacent to the Condrey Mountain Roadless Area and the Kangaroo Roadless Area surrounding the Red Buttes Wilderness.

You can guarantee that Applegate Neighborhood Network will continue the Applegate Valley tradition of defending the wild places we love and the landscapes that define this beautiful valley. We hope that others in the community will join us and support our work. The future of this valley depends on the efforts we make today.

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Applegate Neighborhood Network (ANN)
Update: Just before publication, BLM notified ANN that all units in the Savage Murphy Timber Sale west of Murphy have been canceled along with road construction and timber sale units on the ART. This is an example of our community successfully defending wild places in the Applegate.

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