

OPINIONS

Behind the Green Door

Need for accountability



Chris Bratt

BY CHRIS BRATT

For the past 42 years, my family has participated in an ongoing debate over the management of the public forests in the Applegate and throughout southern Oregon. Existing laws require that our public forests be managed on a “sustained yield” basis and use should be limited to the level that can be maintained in perpetuity.

Accumulated data over these past four decades indicate that federal forest land-management agencies have not fulfilled this mandate. Overoptimistic projections of tree growth, overcutting of large trees, failures of reforestation, and improper or no monitoring of projects have led to many problems in our forests: an increased number of endangered species, a fragmented patchwork of forest stands, and others.

It has not been an easy task for some Applegaters and others in our small communities to influence the large bureaucratic government agencies like the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) or the US Forest Service (USFS). These agencies always come into our communities with tree-cutting plans already conceived and directed from afar. Also, we have had to endure considerable pressure from bodies

like Oregon State University, county commissioners, and a multitude of private timber corporations and their supporters telling us to mind our own business and leave public forest-management decisions to the professionals.

Despite all of the above negative constraints (and more), local citizens have continued to make a big impact in protecting forest sustainability and other resource values. We have made more people in the community aware of the cumulative decline of our forests. Because of this citizen oversight, we also have helped make agency plans better on the ground, and we have won many cases in federal courts.

Often derided for their work, local environmentalists have had to become the environmental watchdogs, the citizen foresters and scientists trying to build a healthier community. They have recognized the importance of local public involvement in guaranteeing better environmental decision-making by federal officials. Because we live here, we are the ones directly affected, who bear the environmental, social, and economic impacts of poor agency decisions. This guarantee of public participation and our

ability to help inform the community about potential health and environmental impacts of proposed agency actions is provided by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This federal law requires each federal agency to make “diligent efforts” to involve the public throughout their decision-making process.

With the passage of NEPA in 1969, Congress recognized the major environmental problems our nation was experiencing. NEPA set policies that were intended to stop resource deterioration and restore environments already damaged by the federal government. The goal of the NEPA process is to reduce adverse environmental effects (or maximize the net beneficial effect), and public involvement is one of NEPA’s fundamental principles for accomplishing that. Despite having good environmental laws like NEPA and environmental groups coordinating to hold federal agencies to account for their management decisions, our efforts to participate are being thwarted.

Presently, there is good cause for concern in our community about the BLM’s rollback of protections for public lands and the deregulation agenda they have adopted. The BLM plans to use

the section of NEPA called “categorical exclusions” for many of their actions in order to avoid environmental assessment, end formal Endangered Species Act consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and limit disclosures under the Freedom of Information Act. I could go on outlining 72 additional bad policy changes that the BLM has made or plans to make soon.

The reality is that NEPA is being gutted and public participation stripped to a bare minimum. The Washington, DC, crowd of newly appointed bureaucrats is reaching new heights of anti-environmentalism through regulatory and administrative changes. So the question becomes “How do we overcome this outrageous detrimental attack on our public lands and citizens?”

My answer is to organize friends and neighbors within our community. The vast majority of Americans want to preserve our public lands and forests, and our community feels the same. Let’s take a tip from the recent Thompson Creek Road residents’ organizing efforts regarding the Apple Jam Music Festival (see page 18 for details) and fight back against these dangers facing our community.

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Post-fire logging: Beyond the smokescreen and rhetoric are significant scientific facts

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

After the active fire season of 2017, residents, scientists, and land managers throughout southern Oregon and northern California have been debating the purported benefits and environmental impacts of post-fire logging. Many in the timber industry and land-management agencies claim that post-fire or “salvage” logging and artificial reforestation (i.e., tree planting) will reduce future fire severity and accelerate the regeneration of conifer forests on burned sites.

In reality, our forests are adapted to mixed-severity fire, including some high-severity fire effects. These forests have evolved to regenerate with abundance following high-severity fires, and the post-fire landscape provides particularly high levels of biodiversity. The dead standing, fire-killed trees provide important wildlife habitat and structural complexity. After falling to the forest floor, they build soil, provide microclimates for regenerating forests, and retain significant amounts of water through our dry Mediterranean summers. Research conducted after the 1987 Galice Fire on the Rogue River showed that downed logs stored 25 times more moisture than forest soils, even following high-severity fire and extended droughts. The same research identifies the downed wood created by fire-killed trees as a “requisite for maintaining long-term forest growth.”

Research conducted in the 2002 Biscuit Fire, which burned west of Cave Junction, demonstrates that post-fire logging actually hinders post-fire regeneration and forest development by degrading soils, destroying natural regeneration, and removing standing snags that aid forest establishment.

Across the region, proposals on our public lands are calling for clear-cut, post-fire logging in recent wildfire areas. Although much of the public debate has surrounded the Chetco Bar Fire Salvage Project outside Brookings, Oregon, similar projects have been proposed by the Klamath National Forest (KNF) in our own backyard. KNF has proposed a large, post-fire logging project in last summer’s Abney Fire, part of the Miller Complex Fire that burned in the mountains above Applegate Reservoir. KNF has proposed to clear-cut over 1,200 acres of fire-affected forest on the Siskiyou Crest near our beloved Cook and Green Pass. The logging would include the removal of fire-killed snags and living green trees that timber managers suspect will die within three to five years.

The area surrounding Cook and Green Pass is one of the wildest and most diverse portions of the Siskiyou Crest and Applegate River Watershed. It is also well-loved by many Applegate Valley residents for backcountry recreation, hiking, botanizing, bird watching, and other outdoor activities. Cook and Green Pass is located along the Pacific Crest Trail and in between the Red Buttes Wilderness, Kangaroo Inventoried Roadless Area, and Condrey Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area. The area is extremely important for habitat connectivity and contains a spectacularly rugged beauty important to many in our region.

Research following the 1987 Silver Fire on the Illinois River, the 1987 fires on the Klamath River, the 2002 Biscuit Fire, and the 2013 Douglas Fire outside Merlin demonstrate that tree plantations

and plantation-like stands burn at elevated levels of fire severity. In some cases, plantations supported over twice as much stand-replacing fire as adjacent unmanaged natural stands. It has been proven that the reburn severity in future fires is more closely associated with the structure of post-fire regeneration than residual downed wood from fire-killed snags. In fact, the largest swath of stand-replacing fire in the 2017 Abney Fire burned in plantation stands on the southern slopes of the Siskiyou Crest. Forest managers are now proposing to create the very same conditions, setting the stage for future high-severity fire effects. Renowned forest ecologist David Perry has stated that once a patchwork of plantation stands is embedded within mature and old-growth forest stands, “the potential exists for a self-reinforcing cycle of catastrophic fires.”

Rather than restoring forest ecosystems and reducing the potential for stand-replacing fire, the post-fire logging proposed across our region will degrade important watersheds and hinder forest regeneration. According to preeminent forest ecologist Professor Jerry Franklin, “Conflicts often exist between economic and ecological objectives as timber salvage is generally about recovering economic values rather than enhancing ecological recovery.”

Don’t be fooled by the smokescreen—post-fire logging is simply an excuse to clear-cut public forests. It provides no benefit to our environment and will increase the severity of future fires.

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