

Where there's smoke ...

Politicians say thinning forests will help prevent 'catastrophic' fires. But ecologists say this season wasn't the worst, and logging won't stop it from happening again.



August's Jazz Fire in Mt. Hood National Forest burned an area that had been thinned. Logging slash acted as fuel for the blaze, yet much of the canopy was spared as a result of the thinning. Both sides of the thinning debate point to examples like this to show how thinning is either good or bad for fire prevention.

PHOTO BY ARKADY BROWN

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

Attorney Brenna Bell keeps a worn Trivial Pursuit card on her desk at Bark's headquarters in Northeast Portland.

The question in the Science & Nature category asks, "Are forest fires good for forests?"

The answer on the back of the card mirrors what ecologists, biologists and conservationists have been saying for decades:

"Yes."

After this past wildfire season, however, it might be hard for residents of the Pacific Northwest, where many metropolitan areas were engulfed with dangerous levels of smoke, to see wildfires as anything other than bad.

Now the timber industry's allies in Washington, D.C., are taking advantage of this wildfire season to push forward legislation that would sidestep public oversight and weaken environmental laws in order to streamline large-scale thinning and logging projects on public lands.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Westerman (R-Ark.) has resurrected his Resilient Federal Forests Act, with proponents pivoting their

arguments to seize upon what many are misleadingly calling one of the worst fire seasons on record. Their rhetoric suggests wildfires have spiraled out of control, in part due to overgrowth resulting from conservationist policies and lawsuits that have slowed thinning and logging.

On Nov. 1, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the act 232 to 188, largely along party lines. In Oregon, Rep. Kurt Schrader was the only Democrat to vote in favor of the bill, which Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.) had helped craft.

While Oregon's U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley are opposed to the Resilient Federal Forests Act and its companion bill in the Senate, they have joined eight other Democratic senators across the West in asking the White House for \$580 million in emergency funding for fire-preventive logging.

"Investing in vital forest thinning and hazardous fuels reduction projects now will make our forests more resilient to catastrophic wildfire in the future," the senators stated in their letter to the president.

According to peer-reviewed studies on the overall likelihood of a thinned area of forest being hit with fire and on historical fire trends, the argument that thinning is the

best way to address future fire seasons like the one we just had is profoundly flawed.

For one, proposals to remove trees, or "fuels," are based on the idea that fires burn more intensely in unlogged forests, making them more severe and quicker to spread.

But a recently published examination of the intensity of 1,500 forest fires over the past 40 years in 11 Western states found the opposite. Its authors, scientists at the Project Earth Institute, Geos Institute and Earth Island Institute, found fires burned most intensely in previously logged areas. In contrast, in wilderness, parks and roadless areas, the fires burned in mosaic patterns — which maintain healthy, resilient forests.

But thinning can be effective if it is done in a precise way. Additionally, the weather and topography have to cooperate and fire has to strike the thinned area before it becomes overgrown again — usually within a window of 10 to 15 years.

As it turns out, the likeliness of fire hitting a thinned stand of trees during that timeframe is between 2 percent and 8 percent, according to a 2008 study of fires in Ponderosa pine forests across the West.

Last year, researchers at the University of Montana and the U.S. Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station found that fires have hit only 7 percent of fuel

reduction treatment areas within the U.S. since 1999.

That's because it's impossible to predict exactly where fire will strike.

At Bark, which serves as an environmental watchdog group for the Mt. Hood National Forest, Bell argues that while the likelihood of fire striking a thinned area is low, those areas treated for thinning are 100 percent likely to be affected by the environmental impacts of the thinning project, which can include lost carbon stores and habitat degradation from road building and the introduction of heavy machinery.

The Jazz Fire

At least one fire in Mt. Hood National Forest this past summer defied the odds when it struck an area that had been thinned in 2016.

At roughly 50 acres, the Jazz Fire was the largest of more than 50 small fires that burned in the Clackamas River Ranger District this season. The area is located a few miles off of Highway 224, not far from Bagby Hot Springs in the Mt. Hood National Forest.

But something seemed odd about this fire, which ignited Aug. 20 and was

See **FOREST FIRES**, page 5