

FOREST FIRES, from page 5

were the same roads that granted human access to that area of the forest – likely leading to the ignition of the fire.

While the fire's cause is officially unknown, Groce, the Forest Service ranger, said there hadn't been any reported lightning in the area, leading the Forest Service to believe it was human-caused.

But Groce said the Forest Service is not directed to decommission roads as a fire-prevention tactic.

"We have roads for a variety of purposes," she said. "We have been very active in trying to right-size our transportation system, but we still need to provide public access to enjoy forests, manage forests and suppress fires. While yes, it's true that people access the forest through our road system and sometimes start fires, that is an illegal activity."

In what Bark considers a partial win, the Forest Service recently agreed to reduce the number of roads it was planning to build for a fuels reduction project on the eastern side of Mt. Hood National Forest, known as the Polallie Cooper timber thinning and fuels reduction area.

"It's for fuels reduction," Krochta said of the project, "but would have built miles and miles of roads in back country, which heightens the risk of fire."

The decision to reduce the number of roads was part of a resolution the Forest Service reached with Bark, which has been fighting the sale since it was first introduced in 1999. Bark had successfully argued that by building more roads, the Forest Service was undermining the very objective of the project: to reduce fire risk.

Not quite 'record-shattering'

Another point of contention among conservationists and some fire ecologists is the rhetoric commonly used in the media and by politicians around wildfires, such as

words like "catastrophic," "disastrous" and "horrific."

While the recent fire-caused deaths in Santa Rosa were unmistakably tragic, many of the other wildfires given these labels were actually part of a healthy forest's life cycle, DellaSala said.

The Eagle Creek Fire, for example, while seen as destructive to many Portland residents, was actually beneficial to the

Columbia Gorge's ecological health, he said.

The latest wildfire season also seemed especially apocalyptic given the extreme amount of smoke that blanketed urban areas. But DellaSala said that had more to do with the location of the fires burning than the number of acres burned. Additionally, smoke is going to be unavoidable some years when you live in a fire-prone region of the country.

Other misleading rhetoric includes calling recent fire seasons "record breaking."

Just one of many examples was Nov. 1, when Merkley's office announced the 11 Western senators' letter to the president asking for fire prevention dollars. It stated the request was being made on the heels of a "record-shattering fire season."

The only thing "record shattering" about this year's fire season, DellaSala said, was fire suppression, or firefighting, spending. Most comparisons deeming the 2015 and 2017 fire seasons "record breaking" look only as far back as the 1980s. But in terms of fire ecology, that isn't long enough to put recent fire seasons in proper context. DellaSala pointed to fire seasons in the early 1900s that burned 10 times as many acres as fires we've seen in recent years.

He said looking back 2,000 years, scientists know fire seasons are tightly correlated with droughts. Wildfires coincide with regional weather patterns that follow global climate forces, such as the recurring pattern known as Pacific Decadal Oscillation, or PDO. Right now, that PDO is

"The kind of habitat that exists after a fire is so rare on the landscape that you really shouldn't be messing with it. There's way less post-fire habitat that exists on national forests than there used to be."

MICHAEL KROCHTA,
BARK'S FOREST WATCH
COORDINATOR

ramping up again like it was in the early 1900s, and fires are increasing along with it.

DellaSala said we're actually making up for a fire deficit.

"You gotta pull back and look at it on a bigger scale, both a time scale and a global scale," he said.

"So when the delegation puts out an announcement that we've got catastrophic fire and all we need to do is reduce fuel hazards and everything will be OK, they are missing the link to these larger-scale processes that determine fire activity because they govern the kind of fire weather we'll get in a particular season."

Reasoning with Congress

DellaSala took these arguments to Washington, D.C., where he testified Sept. 27 before the House Natural Resources Committee's oversight subcommittee.

Westerman, the chief sponsor of the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017 (H.R. 2936), chaired the committee.

Proponents of the bill, such as Oregon's Walden, argue that it would give foresters and firefighters new tools to protect the forests, but conservationists say those tools would cripple their ability to intervene in environmentally unsound projects.

Groups such as Bark often challenge timber sales on public lands using provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act. This law mandates that the federal government conduct assessments of how a project would affect watersheds, the ecosystem and species in the project area.

This process includes opening up its analysis for public view and comment. This is the point in the process where conservationists have an opportunity to point out flaws in the plan, where the agency might have made mistakes or overlooked impacts, and then make comment and alert the public to do the same.

The Resilient Federal Forests Act would allow the government to exempt from this public process logging projects covering less than 10,000 acres – which accounts for most logging projects.

Also mixed into the fire-logging debates is

the practice of salvage logging after a burn has come through, and these projects would also be exempted from environmental review under Westerman's bill.

On Sept. 8, Walden introduced a bill to allow salvage logging in the Eagle Creek Fire area. But many conservation groups, including Friends of the Columbia River Gorge, are outraged, saying it would harm the ecosystem, not help it.

Krochta said the only objective to salvage logging is getting the trees out of a burn area while they still have monetary value. They are often weakened by a fire, which can make way for beetle infestations that ultimately kill them, making them worthless to timber companies.

But salvage logging a post-fire habitat is one of the worst things for it, he said.

"For one, driving heavy machinery on soil that's this exposed, it really takes a while for the vegetation to come back, to stabilize it," he said. "The kind of habitat that exists after a fire is so rare on the landscape that you really shouldn't be messing with it. There's way less post-fire habitat that exists on national forests than there used to be."

He said there are species that "really specifically" rely on these areas, such as the black-backed woodpecker, whose back is black because it's adapted to foraging on burnt tree trunks.

While thinning projects and salvage logging will not prevent another fire season like the Pacific Northwest just saw, what we're doing about climate change can affect the frequency of such seasons, DellaSala said.

"That's the real causative agent here," he said. "If we don't get our heads around doing something about reducing fossil fuel emissions, we could very well see more active fire seasons like this producing more smoke. We keep avoiding the main issue here, which is these fires are being exacerbated by a climate signal that we're not paying attention to. Instead we're trying to treat the symptom, rather than the cause."

emily@streetroots.org; Twitter @greenwrites

22 SW 3rd Ave.

WOODOOROO DOUGHNUT

WORD JUMBLE


1501 NE Davis

EMLPA
○○○○○

IPLF
○○○

MEOHR
○○○○

ASMMOI
○○○○○○

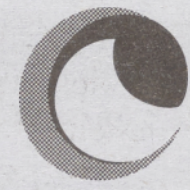


Which doughnut is named after Elvis Presley's entourage?

Print answer here

THE ○○○○○○

○○○○○



PANACEA
All Profits to Social Justice

Cannabis with Benefits

Panacea is a non-dividend, triple-bottom-line company. We commit 100% of profits to affordable housing and social justice.

Everyone else is just sellin' weed.

Recycle your cannabis money back to the community at Panacea.

6714 NE Sandy Blvd, Portland, Oregon • 503-477-5083
www.panaceapdx.com • panacea_pdx
Mon-Sat, 10-8, Sun 11-5