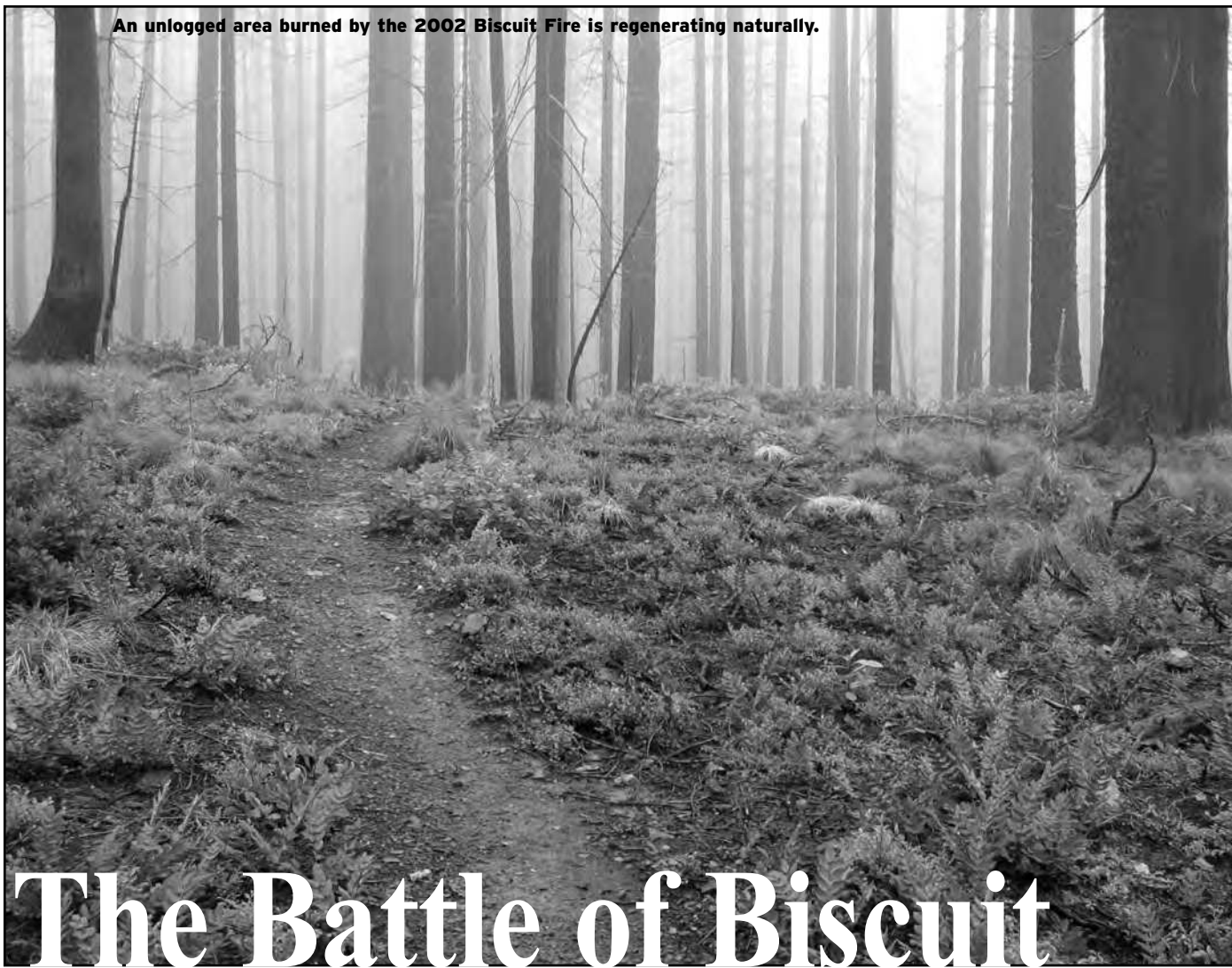


An unlogged area burned by the 2002 Biscuit Fire is regenerating naturally.



ROLF SKAR

The Battle of Biscuit

POST-FIRE LOGGING CONTROVERSY SPLITS THE OSU COLLEGE OF FORESTRY IN TWO. BY KERA ABRAHAM

In mid-July 2002, lightning ignited five flames in southwest Oregon's Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands, including a funny-shaped hill called Biscuit Mountain. A wind blew up from the east and the fires joined, creating a blaze that fire crews couldn't contain. The Biscuit Fire, as it's called, burned through 500,000 acres in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, sizzling out only with the October rains.

Where a biologically rich green forest had once been, a mostly black landscape remained. People in the local community were shaken by the blaze, some worrying about lost timber jobs, some mourning the loss of all that old-growth forest. And the question became: What are we going to do about this?

The people of Douglas County soon realized that they weren't the only ones wondering. Turns out that most of Oregon's state and federal legislators, more than a dozen environmental groups, the entire U.S. Forest Service, a determined crew of protesters, forestry scholars, timber companies across America, international news outlets and President Bush were asking the same question — and proposing their own answers.

Science, not spin, can best inform post-fire forest management policy decisions. But current science provides only a sketchy understanding of forests' responses to fire. So far, less than 30 peer-reviewed studies have examined western post-fire forest ecosystems. To fill in the knowledge gaps, Biscuit's stakeholders turn to Oregon State University's College of Forestry (CoF), the breeding-grounds for experts nearest the burn.

What they find is a college split in two, with some faculty members suggesting that

the burned old forests should be actively managed to grow back the tall firs fast and others insisting that the best course of action is to leave nature alone.

More dramatic than the rift in opinion is the scandal that has dogged the college since January, when a graduate student released a study reporting that post-fire logging can hinder forest regeneration and increase fire risk. A group of faculty members, including CoF Dean Hal Salwasser and forest engineering professor John Sessions, immediately launched a campaign to discredit the report, raising questions about academic freedom at one of the nation's top forestry schools.

Turns out the very same lightning that started the Biscuit Fire also ignited the tension that built up like tinder in the CoF's halls. And it's a hot one.

The management question

The debate zooms in on specific parts of the federal forest. Most people agree that some logging is reasonable on lands legally dedicated to mixed use, where timber production is one of the goals. And few would argue in favor of logging the wilderness areas, which are legally defined as places to be left untouched by human impact. The controversy is over the old forests (LSRs), reserved under the Northwest Forest Plan for wildlife habitat, and the inventoried roadless areas, which were protected from logging by the Clinton-era Roadless Rule until the Bush administration repealed it.

The policy question: What should the Forest Service do after a fire turns a complex old forest into a newborn landscape — log and replant it to grow big conifer trees fast, or leave it alone to let nature take its course?

Under the Northwest Forest Plan, the answer should be whatever action plan is best for the northern spotted owl and other mature forest species.

Soon after the Biscuit Fire, Forest Service administrators in the Siskiyou began to make their post-fire plans under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), considering action alternatives, weighing ecological and economic concerns and collecting public comments. They drafted a proposal to cut 96 million board feet of wood from mixed use lands. The most pristine parts of the Siskiyou — the wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas and old forest reserves — would be left to recover on their own.

In July 2003, the Forest Service suddenly put the brakes on its plans in order to consider new information from a review by a team of OSU forestry professors formed by Salwasser and led by Sessions. The analysis, which came to be known as the Sessions report, estimates that more than two billion board feet of burnt timber could be cut from the Biscuit area and warns that the longer the Forest Service waits before logging, the less that timber will be worth.

Despite major gaps in that report such as the failure to consider applicable environmental regulations, the assumption that logging is permitted in protected old growth and roadless areas and the inclusion of non-merchantable burnt hardwoods in the volume estimate, Forest Supervisor Scott Conroy sent his 17-expert team of ground-pounders back to the drawing board, telling them to produce an option to cut at least a billion board feet. That led to a new plan to cut 372 million board feet, some of it from protected old forests and roadless areas.

A flood of public opposition followed the

proposal. The agency received 23,000 public comments, 95 percent of them opposed to post-fire logging, and environmental groups filed a half-dozen lawsuits challenging the plan. The Forest Service pushed ahead with logging operations anyway, despite staffing shortages and auction prices 70 percent lower than expected. By January 2005, with only 53 million board feet cut, the operation had cost taxpayers more than \$14 million, according to a World Wildlife Fund report.

Protesters blocked bridges along hauling paths and environmental groups went on the attack, saying that logging a forest after wildfire is like rubbing sandpaper on a burn victim's skin. Loggers and timber lobbyists fought back, blaming the environmental regulations for delaying the process and letting all that valuable timber go to waste.

This couldn't go on. Everyone agreed that something had to be done. Right on cue, Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.) introduced a bill to make these decisions much simpler.

The legislative battle

Walden's bill, the Forest Emergency Recovery and Research Act (FERRA), would allow the Forest Service to bypass the environmental and public processes required under NEPA after natural disturbances on federal forests. Walden has used the Sessions report to defend the idea that post-disturbance logging operations simply can't wait for bureaucracy.

If FERRA as currently written becomes law, the Forest Service could bring bulldozers and chainsaws into public old-growth reserves within 30 days of a fire, flood, tornado, mudslide, avalanche, infestation, windstorm, drought or volcanic eruption — a list so inclusive it could apply to most federal forests in any given year.

"If they included meteors and squirrel sneezes, they would probably cover the whole gamut," said American Lands Alliance Director Randy Spivek, who opposes FERRA. "Walden's legislation would elevate the emergency of dead wood to that of a national security issue."

The law would be a huge boon to Walden's biggest financial backer, the timber industry, which contributed \$110,000 to his 2003-2004 congressional campaign. Sen. Gordon Smith (R-Ore.), who is introducing similar legislation in the Senate, received \$227,000 from big timber during his 2001-2006 election cycle. U.S. Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey, who as a timber industry lobbyist co-wrote the 1995 salvage logging rider that sparked the Northwest timber wars, is also backing the bill.

So is the dean of the OSU College of Forestry. Salwasser has thrown his clout behind FERRA just as he did for the bill's predecessor, the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA), which permitted the Forest Service to log in previously protected federal lands before wildfires. FERRA would increase harvest rates in Oregon as well as amp up forestry research funding — a potential windfall for the cash-strapped CoF.

"(FERRA) completes what HFRA began," Salwasser told a House committee last November. Asked whether the CoF's dependence on timber money influenced his support for FERRA, Salwasser replied, "That doesn't come into play in my thinking."

FERRA may have political momentum, but it isn't about to pass without heavy con-