

The Skinny on Thinning

Should we save the forest from itself?

I'd like to follow up on forester Roy Keene's sensible Viewpoint (10/4) discussing the need to take action to protect homes from burning in wildfires. Where Keene's focus was urban forests, I'd like to discuss public lands.

Before going any further, let's make a clear distinction between maintaining "defensible space" 100 feet around a home - by pruning low hanging dead tree branches, cleaning out gutters and mowing high lawns, storing combustibles away from a home and installing metal roofs - and cutting trees miles away from any dwelling.

It's well known that our remaining 5 percent of native forests on National Forest and BLM lands are wild forests that have evolved with fire for thousands of years. Yet what we're hearing from the logging industry, USFS, some politicians and more and more environmental groups is that because of fire suppression, tens of millions of acres of our forests are now "overstocked," an "extreme fire danger" and - who could've guessed? - need to be logged, excuse me, "thinned," to save the forest from itself!

There's no question that we need to allow the natural cycle of wildfire to return to our forests. Yet are we overestimating the effects fire suppression has had on our forests? Over the history of many Western forests, particularly the temperate rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, often several hundred years passed without a fire. And when those fires did burn, they were often "stand replacement" fires, meaning most of the trees burnt, replenishing forest soils and setting the stage for a new cycle of forest growth.

Consider this: Fire suppression has never been all that effective and has only occurred for the past century, industrial fire suppression (helicopters) only over the last 50 years. So if these forests have historically gone centuries without a fire, less than a hundred years of fire suppression hasn't altered the fire cycle at all.

And of course, let's not forget that the unconscionable decimation of our forests over a century of "industrial forest management" remains the greatest threat to forest health.

On a positive note, science is finally catching up to common sense that "thinning" a forest can open it up to sunlight and wind, drying it out and creating more undergrowth, and can therefore not only make a fire burn *hotter* but actually spread *faster*. In fact, recent science demonstrates that forests that were "thinned" before a wildfire, including the Biscuit Fire, ended up with more dead trees than the forests that were left to nature.

Those of us who have investigated the aftermath of this summer's Lake Tahoe fire learned that a major cause of homes igniting was unmaintained defensible space around these homes, which spread to other unmaintained homes. Not surprisingly, many of the forests around Lake Tahoe had already been "thinned," *some of them up to six months before the fire*, which - at best - did next to nothing to prevent the fire, and - at worst - intensified the blaze.

In our neck of the woods, we're being subjected to the "Oakridge Thinning and Fuel Reduction Project," yet another example of business-as-usual logging being dishonestly passed off under the guise of "forest health thinning." We recently toured this 80- to 120-year-old native forest in the Willamette National Forest with Roy Keene, who in his comments renamed the project the "Oakridge Timber Harvest and Fuel Production Project." Keene contested the USFS claim that the project would "increase public safety" and commented that if the project went through "surrounding forests and human dwellings will be at greater fire risk than they are now." Submit your own comments to earnberg@fs.fed.us.

The single most important action we can take to protect homes from wildfire is maintaining defensible space 100 feet around homes and installing metal roofs. But our efforts shouldn't stop there: We must also realize that fire is a part of our forests, and if we choose to live there, we must face the consequences - not expecting firefighters to risk their lives or for more forests to fall for our sake. Comprehensive action would also involve changing zoning laws to stop sprawl into the ever-expanding "wildland urban interface," so we can let natural wildfires burn.

Emerging science demonstrates that the real culprit for creating more wildfires - including southern California's blazes - is not "fuels" but climate and weather. Climate change simply means we must learn to live with more wildfires.

Humankind can be pretty smart (we made it to the Moon), but we can also be pretty stupid (we're destroying the lungs of the planet for profit). One thing, however, is certain: Mother Nature knows best. So let's be responsible and stop logging the publicly owned forests, let them recover and let God and nature back in.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

customers. Not everyone can work retail - it takes a certain disposition to work it.

We have not had a raise in four years. The employers are suggesting that we renegotiate our health benefits that have worked for the employees for years. We have kept these by conceding other things in past contracts.

Now they want to be open on Christmas Day - the one day that we could always count on to have a day off to spend with our families.

Next time you are shopping at Fred Meyer, Albertsons or Safeway, take a few minutes to visit the manager and ask them why after eight months, we do not have a new contract and why we should be working Christmas Day.

Janet Harold
Springfield

DO YOUR JOB, WATADA

When U.S. Army Lt. Ehren Watada joined the army, did he think he could pick and choose what war he would go to? Mr. Watada, no one forced you to join the Army, and before there was a war you had no problem in spending your paychecks.

Imagine if a fireman said, "I didn't sign up to fight these kind of fires." What would be our response? So why do we want to offer Watada sympathy and support? Sure, we shouldn't be over there. I for one believe most wars are wrong, but Watada willingly joined the Army. Why? Well, only he can answer that, but I think he was after the free money and benefits of being in the army. Then a war breaks out, and he all of a sudden believes it is illegal and unconstitutional. Bullshit!

Mr. Watada, you don't deserve to wear the uniform of a U.S. Army soldier, and for damn sure you don't deserve the title of lieutenant. I usually agree with most of what is in the *EW*, but this just rubbed me wrong, and for the first time in my life I wrote a letter to the editor.

Keep up the good work, *EW*, and thanks for 25 years.

L. Paul Meier
Salem

BIGGEST LOSERS

Watching the GOP presidential candidates debate, restate and support President Bush's failed policies about the war in Iraq and the privatization of Social Security set me to thinking about how good a job these candidates are doing. The GOP contenders are doing an excellent job of positioning the Republican Party into becoming the biggest political loser of all time. The ability of these personalities to parrot the party line at the expense of the existence of the GOP is truly astonishing and gratifying. As a lifetime Democrat, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the GOP presidential candidates for their best efforts in extinguishing the GOP once and for all. The GOP and all of its neo-con nut jobs are headed for the trash can of history, courtesy of the words and deeds of their own candidates. Good job!

Gerry Merritt
Eugene

OFFSETTING THE BENEFITS

In response to the letter "Biodiesel Ain't Bogus" (10/11) and other writings on the subject, here is a line of reasoning I haven't heard.

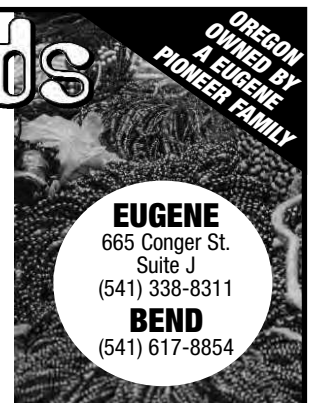
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