

Wildfires: ‘It’s like planning for a Category 5 hurricane’

Continued from Page A2

and the sheer devastation to the community and the level of crown fire that was down around that basin ... it really blows my mind.”

As for the industrial timberlands surrounding the community, which are systematically logged, reforested, thinned and managed as crops, he said, “I think it’s pretty clear that this level of intense management didn’t aid the community in any way.”

It’s a topic the entire state — indeed, the entire western half of the country — will debate in the aftermath of this fire season. In the first three days alone, the Labor Day fires in Oregon burned 750,000 acres, more than all but four entire fire seasons recorded in the past. And as the frequency and intensity of such conflagrations increase due to global warming and old-school fire suppression policies, the need for the state to find effective solutions has become acute.

Among them, perhaps the most frequently mentioned is “forest management,” usually some combination of logging, controlled burns and underbrush removal. It’s trumpeted by President Donald Trump, the wood products industry and to a lesser extent, by Gov. Kate Brown, who has explored it as a way to reduce fire risks on some 5.6 million acres over the next 20 years.

But for Oregon’s west-side forests, such large-scale treatments may be ecologically impractical, economically unfeasible, or flat out ineffective.

Oregon’s Labor Day fires took place on some of the most heavily logged timberlands in the state. And when it came to saving trees, lives and property, that management was largely irrelevant. In fact, some contend it may have made the problem worse.

Then again, perhaps nothing could have stopped these fires.



LEFT: An aerial view of a previous clearcut near Blue River in early October after the Holiday Farm fire. RIGHT: An aerial view in early October of private forestland near Blue River that burned in the Holiday Farm fire.



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“It’s like planning for a Category 5 hurricane,” said John Bailey, a forestry professor at Oregon State who studies fire ecology. “Under those conditions, fire does what it wants.”

To manage or not?

Fire experts are still studying the intensity and severity of Labor Day’s infernos. But it’s clear that tree mortality was very high, hammering forests where Oregonians live, work and play.

The fires on the west slope of the Cascades destroyed nearly 1,400 homes. They gutted large swaths of the Opal Creek Wilderness, one of the state’s last refuges of true old growth. Big chunks of treasured forest along the McKenzie and North Umpqua rivers were consumed, and the highways are being transformed into corridors of stumps.

Scientists say fire is a natural, necessary part of the landscape. The forests will recover. But not in our lifetimes.

For all their collective value, these places were hardly pristine. They have been heavily logged since Europeans settled in Oregon. The old growth. The second growth. Even the third.

About 43%, or 355,000 acres of the land area within the perimeter of the Labor Day fires was privately owned, according to an analysis by industry consultant

Mason, Bruce & Girard. The vast bulk of that acreage is in industrially managed timberlands owned by companies such as Weyerhaeuser Co., Port Blakely, Freres Lumber Co., Frank Timber Co., Seneca Jones Timber Co., Roseburg Resources Co. and Campbell Global/Franklin Clarkson Timber.

For some of those companies, the fires blew a 40-year hole in their inventory models, which are managed over generations to deliver a sustainable yield of fiber to their mills and timber buyers.

Those companies buy timber off federal lands, too. Some 440,000 acres within the fire perimeter are owned by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Wood products companies are still tallying their losses. But for lands that burned, they are in a race against time to salvage whatever trees are merchantable. The window will only be open for two years, after which the wood will begin to deteriorate due to rot, wind blowdown and insect infestations.

An industry push to log burned trees and plant new ones is already underway. The Oregon Forest Industries Council says the fires may have killed trees that would produce 15 billion board feet of lumber, nearly four times what the industry typically harvests in a year. Quickly removing that tim-

ber and milling it into wood products, the group contends, will prevent further carbon emissions, eliminate fuel for future fires and provide the material necessary to rebuild communities.

In the short run, salvage logging is likely to produce a surplus of wood, albeit charred. But after that’s processed, wood products companies will be looking for replacement volumes. And the logical place to look is the intact federal forests that sit within their most profitable wood basket.

The rationale for more intensive forest management — beyond industry profits, jobs and support for rural communities — is to reduce fire risk by thinning the forests and removing fuels that can stoke large fires. They say that’s a particular problem on federal forests, which make up 60% of Oregon’s timberland, but have seen only limited harvests and other management activities for decades.

“I really hope that these fires are an example for Oregonians that we need to manage these resources or else fire is going to become a much more daily part of our lives,” said Tyler Freres, vice president of sales at Freres Lumber. “We need, as a people and a society, to go in there, make use of the dead and the dying, clean out our forests and reduce the fuel loads to

minimize the effects of these fires on a long-term basis.

“We can’t just put a globe over our forests and say this is going to be perfect if we let it manage itself.”

Solution or part of the problem?

The prospect of major salvage logging or subsequent thinning projects on the west-side’s publicly-owned forests, however, is anathema to conservation groups. They contend post-fire logging will destroy sensitive soils and cause major runoff and water quality problems for communities like Salem and Eugene. They say it’s best to leave the dead trees for forest and wildlife recovery. And they insist that intensive management won’t solve fire problems.

They did their own analysis of the Labor Day fires and found that 76% of the area in the Holiday Farm fire was previously logged. On the Riverside fire it was 57%, and on the Beachie Creek fire, more than 40%. Those lands are also crisscrossed by roads, which typically act as fire breaks.

“The fire areas had been logged left, right and center and it did not stop the fires,” said Erik Fernandez, wilderness program manager at Oregon Wild. “If anything, it may have fueled the fires even more.”

That remains an open question. In Labor Day’s

windstorm, tree mortality was high in all forest types. But academics says it’s something they’ll be studying. However, the woody debris left behind by logging, if not burned or cleaned up, can become easy fuels to help feed wildfires. And research suggests that industrially managed lands, which contain dense stands of uniformly aged trees and no canopy of mature overstory to cut wind speeds, can burn with greater intensity in wildfires.

Mike Beasley, a fire behavior analyst and board member at the Firefighters United for Safety Ethics and Ecology, did some preliminary analysis of the Holiday Farm fire using infrared data gathered by U.S. Forest Service aircraft. That data, he wrote, shows how forest openings created by active logging channeled the fire and may have increased its impact.

Daniel Gavin, a professor of geography at the University of Oregon, says his preliminary review of satellite data from the Holiday Farm confirmed studies showing that fires in timber plantations burn hotter, increase the rate of spread and consume more soil.

Researchers still agree that there is a role for thinning and fuel reduction projects. But it’s hardly a panacea, particularly in the backcountry, according to research by Tania Schoennagel, an ecologist at the University of Colorado.

“Roughly 1% of U.S. Forest Service forest treatments experience wildfire each year, on average,” said a 2017 research paper she co-authored. “The effectiveness of forest treatments lasts about 10–20 years, suggesting that most treatments have little influence on wildfire.”

What does make sense, researchers suggest, is getting more fire into the forests, either by leaving existing wildfires to burn up fuels, or by introducing more prescribed burns. A lot more.



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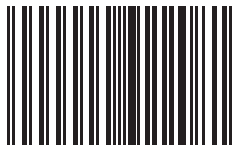
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