

FOREST: The average spacing between trees should be 18-20 feet

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some of them will die," he explained.

Drought-stressed trees are also more vulnerable to pine beetle infestations, Beechinor said, adding to the amount of dead wood that may fuel a potential wildfire. If the flames manage to climb into the tops of larger trees, it could result in an unstoppable inferno bearing down on communities and the environment.

Programs available

Currently, Beechinor is in the middle of a three-year project to treat 20 acres of the property overlooking the North Fork Walla Walla River, with the help of his wife, Cindy, and three kids and five grandchildren.

Funding for the work comes in part from the National Fire Plan, a federal program that allocates money to states for forest thinning projects. Grants are awarded to landowners through the Oregon Department of Forestry, reimbursing up to 75 percent of the project cost.

Hans Rudolf, stewardship forester for ODF in Pendleton, is often the boots on the ground to assess local properties and determine where landowners could target fuels reduction.

Nine times out of 10 on site visits, Rudolf said there is some part of a property overstocked with trees and brush. Healthy stands tend to average somewhere between 80 and 100 trees per acre, he said, though some areas have as many as 1,000 to 2,000 trees per acre.

"Basically, it's a clump of continuous fuel," Rudolf said. "So if a fire gets in there, it's not only going to burn hotter, but a lot of times it creates ladder fuels ... If it gets into the tops of trees and makes runs, there's not much our people can do."

Rudolf cited the Eagle Creek fire, which reached into the tree canopy and made a 12-mile run its first night.

The National Fire Plan provides grants for thinning out small trees 7 inches in diameter or less to improve fire safety. The average spacing between trees should be 18-20 feet, Rudolf said, providing enough of a buffer to keep fires on the forest floor.

Most people hire contractors to do the work, though Beechinor said he and his family prefer to do the job themselves. He and Cindy even completed master woodland manager training through Oregon State University Extension Service in 2007, to help them make informed decisions on the ground. "I like this kind of work," Beechinor said with a smile. "We take great care."

Wildland-urban interface

Grants for thinning projects are often geared toward the wildland-urban interface, Rudolf said, where



Tom Beechinor of Walla Walla stands next to a slash pile at the site of the most recent forest clearing project in northern Umatilla County east of Milton-Freewater.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



A view overlooking the North Fork Walla Walla River watershed in northern Umatilla County.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Trees stacked in a slash pile from a forest clearing project east of Milton-Freewater.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

homes and cabins meet the forest environment.

ODF protects a number of wildland-urban areas in the Blue Mountains of Umatilla County, spanning from Tollgate to the north to Meacham in the middle and Ukiah to the south. Specific boundaries are mapped in the county's Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which was written and approved in 2005.

"You start putting 400-500 structures into a relatively small area, it

creates a lot of dynamics in that wildland-urban interface," Rudolf said, with firefighters having to consider things like access, propane tanks and firewood around homes. "It can add to the complexity and sometimes to the intensity of a burn."

Matt Hoehna, ODF unit forester in Pendleton, said agencies will be working to update the Umatilla County Community Wildfire Protection Plan later this winter and into next year. Doing fuels work is critical,



A cleared stand of Douglas and grand fir trees on forest property owned by Tom and Cindy Beechinor east of Milton-Freewater.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

he added, especially considering the district may have limited resources during a wildfire.

"If we're in a wildland-urban interface area, we could have lots more structures or residences than we're able to protect at any given point," Hoehna said. "If somebody has a cabin that hasn't been thinned around, we're not going to put people in there to defend that structure."

The issue boils down to outreach and education,

Rudolf said. He understands some people may be reluctant to invest in thinning work — perhaps they are part-time or seasonal residents, or maybe they are waiting to maximize the value of their wood.

Jerry Lankford, owner of Lankford Logging Inc. in Pilot Rock, said log markets have picked up somewhat this year, but wood chip markets are still struggling as paper mills cut back on production and biomass continues to find its footing.

"We really don't have a biomass market to speak of. Never have," Lankford said. "There's a resource here that's not being utilized, and we have an endless supply of it."

Dale Freeman, president of the Langdon Lake Association, said the community there completed a thinning project through the National Fire Plan four years ago. Located near Tollgate, Langdon Lake has 64 cabins including one owned by former U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith.

"I think everybody was on board to see what we could do to enhance the safety of our 160 acres," Freeman said. "Now, it just looks beautiful up there."

Cabin owners are further subject to complying with rules under the Oregon Forestland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Act, Freeman said, which requires them to remove excess fuels around homes and other structures. The law also stipulates that firewood be kept at least 20 feet away from homes during fire season, among other regulations.

Recent fire seasons have helped to hammer home the importance of fire safety and compliance in the community, Freeman said, referencing a pair of fires on Weston Mountain earlier this year that shut down Highway 204 and threatened structures.

"We're praying to God we never end up with a fire up here," he said. "But you never know."

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