

USFS pays \$115K to settle salvage logging lawsuit

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

SALEM — The U.S. Forest Service has agreed to curtail logging and pay environmental advocates \$115,000 to settle a lawsuit over post-fire salvage logging in Oregon.

In 2020, massive wildfires burned 1 million acres of forestland in the state, including 176,000 acres in the Willamette National Forest.

The flames swept through two previously approved forest projects, prompting the Forest Service to adjust those plans to include post-fire salvage logging.

The Lang Dam and Highway 46 projects initially focused on commercially thinning roughly 2,600 acres to reduce tree density and were not challenged in federal court.

However, the Cascadia Wildlands and Oregon Wild nonprofits brought legal action against the revised plans, alleging they should have undergone additional environmental analysis.

Last year, U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken ruled in favor of the environmental plaintiffs and issued a preliminary injunction that blocked the Forest Service from conducting post-fire salvage logging.

However, that injunction was not permanent and the litigation was allowed to proceed.

The environmental plaintiffs have now struck a settlement deal under which the agency has agreed not

to move forward with many of the planned timber sale units. Other units were modified to reduce their size or to ensure they retain at least 60% canopy cover.

“Generally, the vast majority of post-fire clear-cutting got dropped,” said Nick Cady, attorney for Cascadia Wildlands.

Thinning operations that were planned before the fires can mostly move forward, though some older forest stands will not be logged, he said.

Post-fire logging is particularly damaging to the environment because it aggravates the erosion of vulnerable soils in burned stands, Cady said.

The agency seized on the opportunity to fulfill timber sale contracts by cutting the damaged trees, he said.

The nearby Breitenbush community was closely involved in developing the original pre-fire projects but wasn’t allowed to offer input on the revised salvage plans, he said.

“We caught the Forest Service kind of red-handed,” he said. “This was the Forest Service trying to cut that community completely out.”

The Forest Service has also agreed to pay \$115,000 in litigation costs and to provide the environmental plaintiffs with monthly updates and at least one field trip to inspect the operations.

The settlement agreement has “no precedential value” and cannot be cited by the environmental groups as case law in other litigation.

Big fire risk up in parts of West

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

SALEM — The risk of large wildfires remains above normal this month in parts of Oregon, Washington and California, according to the National Interagency Fire Center’s Predictive Services unit.

“For at least the next two months, we have above-normal significant fire potential along and east of the Cascades, much of northern California and central California, north-west Nevada and southwest Idaho,” said Nick Nauslar, a meteorologist at the Fire Center in Boise.

He said forecasters remain concerned about long-term drought and fine-fuel loading. An unusually wet spring in spots plumped grasses and shrubs, increasing available fire fuel.

“We are worried about fine-fuel loading in northwest Nevada, Eastern Oregon, southwest Idaho and even into the Columbia Basin,” Nauslar said.

In forested areas from central California into the Oregon Cascades, forecasters remain concerned about long-term drought, he said. These areas now appear likely to see drought persist and possibly worsen.

The July-October report said climate outlooks indicate below-normal precipitation is likely across much of the Plains through the central Rocky Mountains and into the Inland Pacific Northwest.



InciWeb/Contributed Photo

The likelihood of wildfires in 2022 will increase in some parts of the West, according to a new forecast.

Above-normal temperatures are likely across much of the contiguous U.S.

Drought continues across 75% of the West and much of the central and southern Plains, the Fire Center said. Extreme to exceptional drought continues over much of California, eastern Oregon and the Great Basin. Drought improved or ceased across much of the Northwest, Idaho and

Montana, though it intensified in a part of north-central Montana.

Large-fire potential is above-normal in July in central and southeast Oregon and in parts of central and southeast Washington, the report said.

The above-normal risk of large fires broadens in August, and in September is expected to spread to west-central Oregon.

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