

Controlled burns a tool to reduce wildfire risk

By Kate Williams
The Oregonian/OregonLive

About 30 members of the crew stood in the morning still of the forest as Katie Sauerbrey laid out the plans for the day. Some carried shovels or pickaxes. Others leaned against trucks and peered at maps of the area. All listened intently as she outlined the risks of their operation.

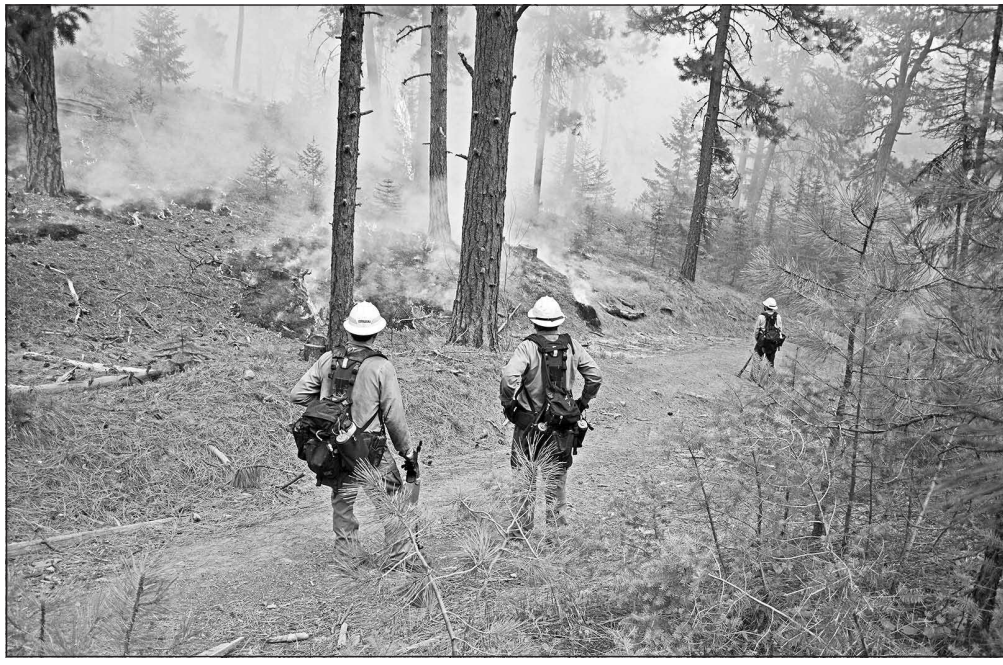
There were 1,000-foot cliffs that fell to the ocean. There were unmarked barbed wire fences. There was a steep drainage full of thorny blackberry bushes.

There would be fire. And they would be the ones to light it.

“With the primary carrier being tall grasses, this thing could move quickly,” she told the group. “We could get some tall flame lengths. Be prepared. Keep your head on a swivel.”

After the briefing, Sauerbrey, a preserve manager with The Nature Conservancy, led the crew — made up of folks from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Oregon Department of Forestry, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and others — on the mile-long hike out to the 30-acre meadow they planned to burn at Cascade Head, a preserve owned by The Nature Conservancy a few miles north of Lincoln City.

Controlled burns like the one overseen by Sauerbrey are an important part of forest management, one of the tools officials use to try and make a dent in the massive buildup of fuels that has amassed over decades of aggressive wildfire suppression. But controlled burns face



S. John Collins / Baker City Herald

Forest Service employees conduct a prescribed burn in the Washington Gulch area near Baker City in April 2016.

obstacles, namely air quality regulations that can limit their effects.

After the last two fire seasons, where portions of the state were inundated with smoke for months on end, officials have begun to ask: might it be wise to endure a small amount of limited smoke in the offseason to mitigate the smoky hellscape that's become the norm over the last few years?

A historical precedent, an unprecedented history

Tribes in the Pacific Northwest have used fire as a tool to shape the landscape for thousands of years. The touch of flame kept huckleberry and camas fields abundant. In areas where tribes hunted deer and elk, fire created a mat of forage plants on the forest floor, a favorite food for the ungulates. Burned areas recycle nutrients more efficiently and help to control the spread of

invasive species.

“Done in a controlled way, as a management tool, as opposed to out of control, fire improves the resources the creator has given us,” said Cheryl Kennedy, chairwoman of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. “This knowledge was instilled in us and we look forward to the day when these practices are as widely used as they should be.”

The tribes used rotating cycles of fires to keep land fresh. Hazelnut stands saw fire at least every 10 years, trees and bushes used for basket weaving were burned every three years or so. The frequency of the burns not only helped the plants grow. It also helped keep the landscape free of dry fuels.

The result would come to be known as the “10 a.m. rule,” which stated that fires should be contained by 10 a.m. the day following their

initial report.

“Fire needs to touch the land once every 10 years,” said David Harrelson, a cultural resources manager with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. “Without it, you leave room for catastrophic fires.”

The way fire is managed across the west changed drastically in the summer of 1910. By August, some 3,000 fires were burning across the west including blazes in the Wallows, on the eastern flank of Mount Hood, in the Umpqua National Forest and on Huckleberry Mountain, just west of Crater Lake.

Along with increased temperatures from climate change, the buildup of fuels has played a role in dramatic fire seasons across the west during the last few years, which have been both costly and harmful to public health. In 2018, wildfires from Washington to California to British Columbia blew smoke into the Portland area, causing unhealthy air quality for days on end. In southern Oregon, unhealthy air lasted for months.

In total, the state spent more fighting wildfires in 2018, nearly \$515 million,

than in any other year.

No magic bullet

A problem of this scale, which spans millions of acres across numerous state lines, has no easy solution.

“We need it all. More thinning. More mechanical treatments. More prescribed burning,” Bailey said. “But it needs to be strategic. You want to look for areas that haven't burned in a long time so, if a wildfire does start there, maybe it will be 5,000 or 10,000 acres instead of 100,000.”

On average, roughly 165,000 acres a year have been treated with controlled burns in Oregon over the last decade. Three times that area — about 470,000 acres a year over the past 10 years — have burned in wildfires. In 2018, wildfires scorched more than 830,000 acres in the state.

Still, there are examples of success. The Millie Fire, which burned nearly 25,000 acres in the Three Sisters Wilderness in 2017, could have been much worse had the area near the town of Sisters not been treated with controlled burns before the wildfire.

In 2017, the Eagle Creek fire scorched nearly 50,000 of Oregon's most beloved acres in the Columbia River Gorge and rained ash and smoke on the state's densest population center. That same year, the Chetco Bar fire in southwest Oregon burned for five months and scorched nearly 200,000 acres.

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Forests like we've never seen

In Oregon, where more than half the state is public land, forests today look like nothing nature intended, more dense than at any point in recorded history.

“In some places there are 10 to 100 times more trees per acre,” said Mark Stern, director of forest conservation with The Nature Conservancy.

The change in forests has changed the way fire behaves in them, said John Bailey, a forestry professor at Oregon State University.

“Fire behavior is based on three things: landscape, weather and fuel,” he said. “The topography hasn't changed, but there are many acres out there that have

CHALLENGE

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Q: What more can Congress do to improve both the number and quality of jobs in the 2nd Congressional District?

• McLeod-Skinner: Congress should partner with the private sector to create good paying infrastructure jobs in renewable energy, rural broadband access, affordable housing, transportation and water systems for economic development in our district. I'll focus on making sure rural communities have access to those resources. We need to stop the tariff war from hurting our agricultural markets. We need a level playing field of net neutrality and a fair pathway to documentation for agricultural workers. My opponent says the economy is booming, but the opposite is true in our district, where nearly half the people live near the poverty line.

• Walden: America's booming economy is due in part to

historic tax relief for middle-class families and for small businesses. My wife and I have been small-business owners in this district since 1986. I understand what it takes to grow jobs. Wages are rising as employers compete to attract workers. With better trade agreements and incentives to bring jobs back to America, we will see more jobs. We must close the skills gap to ensure people have the education they need to compete in today's labor force. That's why I've supported legislation to strengthen career and technical education and training.

Q: Pick one other issue affecting the 2nd Congressional District on which you would like to see more action from the House in 2019.

• McLeod-Skinner: Education is vital for uplifting our communities and strengthening our economy. Congress should invest more in early childhood and special education. I've proposed an exchange of public service

for college education or trade school, enabling students to develop their professional skills without being buried in debt. This will benefit our rural communities by providing trained professionals — doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, technicians and other skilled trades — to help grow our rural economies as they “pay off” their education through public service. It's a win-win.

• Walden: We need to fix the problems at the Veterans Administration. The men and women who have worn our nation's uniform and fought for our freedom should NOT have to wait months for medical care and years to straighten out benefit issues. They deserve better. I've voted for historic funding for the VA, and for efforts to improve mental health care, opioid addiction treatment and suicide prevention programs. I've helped thousands of veterans in the 2nd District get the benefits and care they are owed and deserve. We must do more to reduce the backlog and delays at the VA.”

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