

What now for burned forests?

Forest Service developing plan to salvage logs

By George Plaven
Blue Mountain Eagle

The damage caused by the Canyon Creek Complex wild-fire south of John Day isn't just limited to 39 destroyed houses.

Flames have also torched tens of thousands of acres of trees and vegetation throughout the Canyon Creek watershed, leaving the barren landscape vulnerable to future soil erosion and flooding.

Officials at the Malheur National Forest are already at work developing a rehabilitation plan to protect the environment while also allowing some opportunities for logging burned up trees to boost the local economy.

The plan, known as a Burn Area Emergency Rehabilitation team, or BAER, outlines site-specific projects to watershed health, such as planting new trees and repairing infrastructure, including bridges and culverts.

Forest Supervisor Steve Beverlin said the planning is done in conjunction with Grant County and local property owners. The BAER team has already started discussing what projects will look like along Canyon Creek to minimize the fire's impact.

"It outlines the actions we're going to do, and where, when and who's going to do them," Beverlin said.

The forest service expects to



The Eagle/George Plaven

Charred snags are left behind from the Parrish Cabin fire that broke out east of Seneca in 2012. It is up to the Malheur National Forest to come up with a management plan for the landscape once firefighters finally extinguish the Canyon Creek Complex that continues to burn south of John Day.

have the Canyon Creek BAER finished within 30 days of when the blaze is fully contained. As of Tuesday, Aug. 25, the Canyon Creek Complex is 74,744 acres and 37 percent contained.

Once foresters are able to access the fire area, Beverlin said they expect to find little vegetation left on the steep hillsides to soak up spring rain snowmelt. Without that natural cover, wa-

ter flows down into the creek as if it's coming off concrete, washing dirt and ash into the stream and creating flooding concerns around homes.

Water quality is an important

issue, since the creek is prime habitat for bull trout and steelhead, Beverlin said.

"We'll have to do a lot of up-land soil stabilization work," he said. "It's our job to slow down

and intercept the precipitation we get so it doesn't all come running down at once."

In addition, Beverlin said there should be some opportunities to salvage burned logs. Exactly how much will depend on the fire's final footprint.

The forest service does not allow salvage logging in the wilderness areas or within 300 feet of streams. The BAER team must also discuss with officials from Malheur Lumber, the local mill in John Day, about the mill's capacity for new logs, Beverlin said.

"We are exploring opportunities for salvage, and there appears to be some," he said. "We're just trying to determine the appropriate places and the appropriate amount."

Some species of animals are able to carve out habitats from burned up tree snags, Beverlin added. In particular, the Malheur National Forest has one of the most diverse groups of woodpecker species anywhere in the country, which feeds on insects found in the decomposing wood.

Beverlin said the forest service would like to get started with rehabilitation before the first major snow of winter, and so far it is ahead of the game. Grant County has already identified Doug Ferguson as a liaison for the group, and conversations are underway with the Blue Mountain Forest Partners collaborative group.

"We're being proactive," Beverlin said. "We really need to get on rehabilitation in a timely manner."

AID

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Dunn said the community has always managed to pull together during hard times, but the Canyon Creek Complex was unlike anything she's ever experienced.

"Canyon Creek going up looks like a bomb went off," she said. "Our hearts just go out to the people who lost everything."

Beyond Grant County, good Samaritans have loaded their cars, trucks and horse trailers with donated goods driven down from Pendleton, Portland, Bend and even as far as Boise. A truck rolled in Saturday from Big R Oregon out of Redmond, carrying pallets of donated horse tack, feed, hoses and even a chainsaw.

Mike and Hilda Allison made the 70-mile drive from Hines with a special delivery of food and water. The couple used to own a logging business together and still know plenty of locals in the John Day area.

"We woke up this morning,

and Mike said 'Let's go do some good things,'" Hilda Allison said. "It's amazing how these small communities rally."

Volunteers help unload and find shelf space for all the new items, while, behind the scenes, another group of volunteers updates a 10-page list of businesses and individuals offering services such as health, housing and financial assistance.

Jennifer Mooney said it is impossible to know exactly how much has been donated so far. Items keep coming in every day, more than they could ever give all away.

"All this is love for the ones who need it," Mooney said. "It's pretty awesome."

Mooney, a retired justice court clerk in Canyon City, has worked at the Fairgrounds Relief Center since it opened Aug. 15 at the peak of the fire's intensity. Her job is to greet families at the door, make sure they sign in and help them figure out what it is they'll need to take with them.

"Most of them are so numb, they can't think," she said. "So we think for them, and try to pick out the things they'll need."

Mooney said she has no idea how people think to donate the things they bring in; things as simple as fingernail clippers that are so basic they're easy to overlook.

There are bigger things too, like furniture, beds and a spare generator. It's all needed and all going to good use, Mooney said.

The relief center keeps an updated list of things victims need on its Facebook page, Fairgrounds Relief Center, which is now followed by 709 people.

"As long as there is a need, we will stay open at the fairgrounds," said Mindy Winegar, office assistant at the Grant County Fairgrounds, who has been helping organize the donations being

brought to the pavilion.

Mooney said they plan to keep taking donations until the need is no longer there.

"We've done this out of love," she said. "We're all helpers, and we want to help."

Dunn still tears up when she thinks about everything that's happened the past week, and especially how her husband's childhood memories have essentially gone up in flames. They might be in limbo now, she said, but they will rebuild. And they will make it better.

"It's just going to take time," Dunn said. "It's been a roller-coaster."

To reach the Fairgrounds Relief Center, call 541-575-1900.

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