



FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE

Wildfire season sparks calls for forestry reform

By George Plaven
EO Media Group

Out of the ashes of another record-breaking wildfire season across the West, Oregon lawmakers are calling for changes in the way national forests are managed and how the government pays for fighting increasingly large, destructive fires.

Rep. Greg Walden, the state's lone Republican member of Congress, visited Eastern Oregon last week where he touted the Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2017, which passed the House Committee on Natural Resources in June. The controversial bill includes provisions that would expedite certain forest thinning projects, while establishing a pilot program to resolve legal challenges through arbitration.

Democrats Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, meanwhile, joined a bipartisan group of senators pushing to end the practice of "fire borrowing," where the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are forced to rob money from fire prevention programs to pay for fighting wildfires.

Their bill, the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017, would make federal disaster funding available when the cost of firefighting exceeds the 10-year average, thereby maintaining the agencies' budgets for other conservation and restoration programs.

In a statement last week, Wyden said communities are put in danger and fire prevention work is left undone because of the backward fire budgeting system.

"It's past time for Congress to make it a top priority to end fire borrowing, stop the erosion of the Forest Service becoming the 'Fire Service,' and start treating wildfires like the natural disasters they are," Wyden said.

The Forest Service has spent more than \$2 billion so far on wildfires nationwide in 2017, setting a new record. Nearly 8 million acres of forest have been consumed by fire this summer, including 678,000 acres in Oregon.

The problem, Walden said, is a lack of active management in the forests, which has resulted in a buildup of overly dense and dead tree stands ready to burn.

"I don't want to see our forests continue to go up (in flames) like they are," Walden said during a meeting Thursday with the *East Oregonian* editorial board.

More than three-quarters of the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests are at moderate to high risk for uncharacteristic fire, according to the Northern Blue Mountains Coalition, a group dedicated to increasing forest thinning and logging. Across the country, 58 million acres of national forests are at high or very high risk of severe wildfires — an area equal to the size of Pennsylvania and New York combined.

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Low-intensity fires, logging prevent megafires

By Sean Hart
Blue Mountain Eagle

As wildfires continue to burn in Oregon and throughout the West, a research ecologist's insights from the past could shape the future of fire management.

A combination of factors has turned forests that were once a patchwork of tree stands and open meadows into overgrown tinderboxes, prime to erupt into the massive fires plaguing the current era that are far more devastating than the smaller, more frequent blazes of the past, Dr. Paul Hessburg said during his presentation "Era of Megafires" on Thursday in John Day.

Many forests, he said, are a "ticking time bomb," needing only a flash of lightning or a human-caused ignition to quickly grow into a force consuming everything in its path and darkening the skies with the haze becoming increasingly familiar each summer.

Even by conservative estimates, the fires will continue to increase in size and number, he said. But there is hope.

Understanding how low-intensity fires help prevent megafires and how management practices contributed to the current conditions, Hessburg said steps can be taken to improve conditions and reduce risk.

"We can learn to live with wildfires in another way," he said.

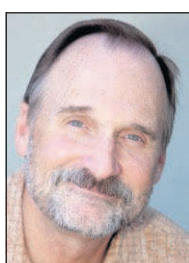
The situation

The 191,067-acre Chetco Bar Fire in southwestern Oregon, 97 percent con-



Contributed photo/U.S. Forest Service

The 2015 Canyon Creek Complex burned 43 structures in Grant County.



Paul Hessburg

tained as of Monday, has burned 30 structures. The suppression cost is already up to \$60.9 million.

And that's only one of 14 large fires burning in the Northwest, according to the National

Interagency Fire Center.

This year, 48,850 wildfires have burned 8.5 million acres across the United States, up significantly from the 10-year average of 53,691 fires burning 5.8 million acres.

In 2016, 4.9 million acres burned, but that was following the 2015 season that burned 9 million acres, including the Canyon Creek Complex that destroyed 43 structures in Grant County.

While the Forest Service spent only 17 percent of its budget on fire suppression 25 years ago, the agency spent 57 percent to fight fires in 2015, Hessburg said.

As a federal agency, taxpayers ultimately shoulder the cost of firefighting. The problem is exacerbated when the Forest Service is forced to spend money planned for fire prevention to

control massive blazes.

And the actual cost of fires is even worse. From lost homes and other negative costs, Hessburg said the economic impact of a fire is 24 times the suppression cost.

"Fires financially impact every taxpayer," he said.

The problem

Before the current era of megafires, Hessburg said, when frequent, low-intensity fires created a dynamic patchwork of tree stands and meadows, that very patchwork sculpted by fire prevented larger fires from occurring.

With less dense tree stands, he said, fires would consume grasses and smaller trees, brush and dead material on the forest floor, while sparing the canopies of some of the larger trees. Those trees, some of which need fire to reproduce, could reseed the nutrient-rich area created by the fire, he said.

Even when the fires climbed the fuel ladder from the grasses through the other material and into the leaves and needles of the larger trees, the fires were less prone to crown — spread treetop to treetop — because the trees and tree stands were farther apart.

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Holding a phone while driving means big fines starting Oct. 1

By Jade McDowell
EO Media Group

Answering a text could cost you a pretty penny after Oregon's new distracted driving law takes effect on Oct. 1.

The more important thing, Oregon State Police emphasize, is it could cost you your life.

That's why starting in October, using a handheld electronic device while driving will cost you \$260 to \$1,000 for your first offense, \$435 to \$2,000 for your second and up to six months in jail for your third.

"I think the message is very clear that the state takes distracted driving seriously," OSP Sgt. Michael Berland said.

Previous distracted driving laws in Oregon only covered texting and talking on the phone. Since those laws were put in place, however, drivers have come up with an



Contributed photo/Hermiston Police Department

Jonathan Newkirk was killed June 25, 2011, in what police suspect was a distracted driving crash on Umatilla River Road near Hermiston.

increasingly long list of reasons to take their eyes off the road. They send photos of the scenery via Snapchat, search Google for nearby restaurants, scroll through a playlist for their favorite song, send work emails or post updates to Facebook.

Berland said one incident

that stands out in his mind was a rollover crash he responded to a few years ago where the female driver was killed.

"We found her iPhone and she was in the middle of making a grocery list," he said.

Instead of spelling out every type of use, the legislature took a more comprehensive

approach this year by passing a bill banning all use of mobile electronic devices while driving. Just holding a phone in your hand while driving is a violation, even if you're not actively using it when an officer spots you. You can use it if you're legally parked on the side of the road, but not while stopped at a red light or stuck in a traffic jam.

More than 3,100 people die every year in cellphone-related crashes, according to the Centers for Disease Control. They leave behind thousands more loved ones devastated by the news of their death.

"One of the worst parts of my job is knocking on someone's door and giving them the worst news of their life," Berland said.

Most people wouldn't drive down Interstate 84 with their eyes closed just because their friend dared them to, but if they answer a text from that same friend while driv-

ing, it creates a similar effect. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, a person takes their eyes off the road for an average of 4.5 seconds while reading a text. At 55 miles per hour, that's the equivalent of driving the length of a football field blindfolded. If the road curves unexpectedly, a car in front hits the brakes or a deer runs onto the road, that "blindfold" can be disastrous.

"Nobody intends on crashing," Berland said. "Nobody intends on taking that call and then running a red light or rear-ending someone or running over a child."

Previously, using a phone while driving was a Class C violation, with a presumptive fine of \$160. All fines are automatically doubled in a school zone or construction zone.

Under the law that takes effect Sunday, a first-time

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