

Where there's fire

Wildfires continue to decimate forests and consume homes in the West, clearly indicating changes are needed to preserve our public lands and protect our communities.

As Dr. Paul Hessburg, a Forest Service research ecologist, outlined in his "Era of Megafires" presentation last week, the number of massive fires each year is expected to continue to increase, and the current approach to fire management is not addressing the underlying problem.

As we said in this space last week, active management through sustainable logging and grazing is a great place to start.

Hessburg points out the dense forests of today do not resemble the healthy forests of old. Policies and practices through the years have culminated to produce unnatural conditions. When combined with increasing temperatures and drought, everyone should be concerned.

Our forests, as Hessburg says, are a ticking time bomb. After the Canyon Creek Complex fire in 2015, I think most in Grant County would agree, even without a scientific opinion in support.

However, Hessburg's research indicating that frequent, smaller fires in the past once prevented the massive blazes we're seeing today provides insight into the situation and points out another problem.

Prescribed burns can improve forest health by reducing fuels and helping restore a resilient patchwork of tree stands and meadows, but strict state Department of Environmental Quality rules often prevent them from being ignited due to air quality concerns.

Clean air is obviously important, but what the current

equation does not factor in is the fact that air quality is far worse during a wildfire than a prescribed burn.

When firefighters can choose when to ignite a fire based on desired weather conditions, they can control the burn much more effectively to accomplish their objectives. Even when the weather conditions are conducive to prescribed burning, though, firefighters must jump through another hoop with the state DEQ.

Proper weather conditions for prescribed burning often only occur during short windows in the spring and fall. DEQ air quality regulations further restrict this window. This reduces the number of projects that can be completed each year, essentially stopping many needed burns.

Without the prescribed burning, the areas remain overloaded with fuels that drive larger fires that create more smoke. Strictly limiting prescribed burns because they produce a little smoke is basically begging for a lot of smoke from a massive wildfire, which also brings increased risk of loss of life and property.

Hessburg said prescribed burns are regulated as a "controllable nuisance," whereas wildfires are considered uncontrollable and, thus, cannot be regulated by the DEQ.

Wildfires may be uncontrollable, but they are also inevitable. Without changes, the amount of smoke in the air as conditions continue to worsen will be intolerable.

State officials should consider the ramifications of inaction when setting air quality rules for prescribed burns.

A little smoke now may prevent a lot of smoke in the future.



GUEST COMMENT

Climate drives fires, not fuel

By George Wuerthner
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

I'd like to respond to the misinformation in the editorial about "Manage forests or watch them burn" in the Sept. 19 Blue Mountain Eagle. It may seem intuitive that if you reduce fuels, you will have fewer large fires. However, what is intuitive is not always scientifically accurate.

It's intuitive that the sun circles the earth, since any fool can see it rises in the east and sets in the west. Yet, we all know that the earth circles the sun even though it would seem obvious that the sun is circling the earth.

Climate/weather drive large wildfires — not fuels. That is why even though there is more biomass on the Oregon Coast, those forests seldom burn. The reason? Because it's too moist and cool.

On the other hand, a lot of research has found, if you have extreme fire weather that includes drought, low humidity, high temperatures and, most importantly, wind, you can't stop fires. These are the very conditions that have existed with all large wildfires from the Canyon Creek blaze to the Eagle Creek Fire by the Columbia Gorge.

Why is this important? Because 95-98 percent of all fires are easily suppressed or, more likely, simply self-extinguish because the weather isn't conducive to fire spread. But a very small percentage of fires occur during extreme fire weather conditions, and these are impossible to control. And these very few large fires are responsible for 95-99 per-

cent of all the acreage burned in any summer.

Under these extreme weather conditions, fires burn through clear-cuts, thinned forests and prescribed burn areas. Nothing stops them. For instance, the Eagle Creek Fire jumped the Columbia River. Talk about a fuel break. There is nothing there but water, but it couldn't stop the fire being driven by 40-50 mph winds.

Worse for the proposed solution of more logging, recent studies have found that fire severity is higher in "actively managed" forests.

For instance, here are the conclusions of a number of recent review studies.

The Congressional Research Service found "From a quantitative perspective, the CRS study indicates a very weak relationship between acres logged and the extent and severity of forest fires. ... the data indicate that fewer acres burned in areas where logging activity was limited."

Yet another study published this last spring concluded: "We investigated the relationship between protected status and fire severity applied to 1,500 fires affecting 9.5 million hectares between 1984 and 2014 in pine and mixed-conifer forests of western United States... We found forests with higher levels of protection had lower severity values even though they are generally identified as having the highest overall levels of biomass and fuels."

Another recent study by researchers at the FS fire lab in Missoula concluded: "Extreme environmental conditions ... overwhelmed most fuel treatment effects ... This

included almost all treatment methods including prescribed burning and thinning ... Suppression efforts had little benefit from fuel modifications."

"Managing forest fuels is often invoked in policy discussions as a means of minimizing the growing threat of wildfire to ecosystems and WUI communities across the West. However, the effectiveness of this approach at broad scales is limited. Mechanical fuels treatments on US federal lands over the last 15 (years) (2001-2015) totaled almost 7 million (hectares) (Forests and Rangelands, <https://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/>), but the annual area burned has continued to set records. Regionally, the area treated has little relationship to trends in the area burned, which is influenced primarily by patterns of drought and warming."

In addition to the failure of forest reduction projects to effectively limit large wildfires, from a forest ecosystem perspective, large high-severity fires are critical to forest health. Many plants and animals depend on the episodic input of snags and fallen logs that are created by large wildfires. They have the second highest biodiversity found our forests.

The reality is that we cannot halt these large fires, but must learn to live with them. Reducing the flammability of homes and not building in high fire locations in the first place are the only proven measures that can save communities.

George Wuerthner is an ecologist and has published 38 books including "Wildfire: A Century of Failed Forest Policy." He lives in Bend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We are facing murder by legislation

Sens. Graham and Cassidy are leading the Republican Senate's last-ditch charge to destroy Obamacare. It is the most harmful effort yet. Upwards to 32 million people would be losing their health care. With the loss of affordable insurance, along with pre-existing conditions, it is projected that many will die, and many more will lose necessary care with the loss of Medicaid. Why should one person die or lose care, let alone the many? This Congress is traitorous. This is murder by legislation!

Are these honest senators, when they deliberately create legislation to legally steal huge funds from needed health care programs to provide huge tax reductions to the billionaires? Or are they cowardly senators, when they bend to the likes of the Koch brothers' threats to withhold campaign donations if Obamacare is not killed? Obviously, they are not concerned about serving you and me. Ironically, whose money are they distributing? Ours!

This national disaster hits home in District Two in Oregon. Walden is a co-author of Trumpcare. Walden votes lock-step with the Trump agenda. If the senate passes the latest bill, Speaker Ryan's promise to the Senate is, "You pass it. We pass it." Walden will vote once again to demonstrate he does not care about his constituents' health and welfare. It is time we vote him out of the House in 2018.

Like everyone in my senior village, insurance is our most important issue. In my case, I am 85 years old, and have had three recent aneurysm operations. With this pre-existing condition, it feels like I'm in front of Graham and Cassidy's firing squad, and nobody gives a damn.

It is time we got mad. It is time

we understood that democracy is a "hands on" sport, not a spectator sport. It is time we understood the problem in Congress is solved only by us getting off the couch and into positive action — not just during a crisis, but every day.

Leif Hatlestad
Rogue River

Projects degradation, not restoration

A recent guest opinion in the Blue Mountain Eagle addressed an issue that has been causing some discussion among local citizens. The information presented by the opinion was well documented and explained. I congratulate the local residents for their willingness to speak up and address the issue. The same project carried out on Beech Creek also was instituted on Camp Creek that runs into the Middle Fork of the John Day River. Camp Creek was a rare pristine creek in this area, and how it was degraded is upsetting to say the least. Restoration is supposed to be good; what happened there was degradation. I spent many hours on Camp Creek in past years; I will never go there again and look at the destruction of stream banks caused by excavators dragging trees down fragile banks and placing them in the stream. No cow or logger could ever decimate a pristine stream like that "restoration" did.

The next time you see a Malheur National Forest sign, notice the small print at the bottom. It states U.S. Department of Agriculture. Agriculture has to do with the growing of crops and using the crops to produce food. It doesn't say anything about restoration of streams by degrading them. We've gone through the cycle of placing wood in the streams, blowing up the

beaver dams, tearing out the wooden dikes and now we're back to doing the same thing all over again.

I am closing with a quote from the Declaration of Independence that states, "He (meaning the king of England) has erected a multitude of New Offices and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and eat out our substance." July 4, 1776. Sure rings a bell for me!

Sharon Livingston
Long Creek

Mind-numbing mass media meddling

The residue of the past, truth of the present and challenges of the future portrayed on mass public media today is a bit disturbing. The dubiously talented daily and nightly talk show hosts appear to be attempting the revitalization of desiccated guest stars. A news media spokeswoman informing us that their job, as it has ever been, is "to control what people think" (can't deny that when viewing the unsettling results of media mind meddling). And finally, the "future" travel to Mars is not as straightforward as it may appear. The TV science channel unleashed the trepidations of sex on Mars. Number one requirement is intrepid bisexual pioneers; number two is the fear that lack of gravity will cause muscle tissue to waste away because of no gravitational resistance on the body; and third is that any vigorous activity will only serve to separate partners due to lack of gravity. How could we survive in our day-to-day humdrum existence without the mind-numbing random deviant interjection determined by those who "control what people think"?

Judy Kerr
Canyon City

WHERE TO WRITE

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