

Replanting a burned-over forest

By LISA BRITTON
Baker City Herald

DOOLEY MOUNTAIN — Cierra Lafferty pats the soil around the newly planted ponderosa pine seedling, then gives the needles a gentle tug to make sure it's secure in the ground.

"Welcome to your new home," she says, her words nearly whisked away by the wind whipping across Dooley Mountain, about 15 miles south of Baker City.

Then she stands, pulls her phone from a pocket and holds it close to the tree.

"Blog moment!" she says, snapping a picture of the seedling, then photos of her buddies.

On Wednesday, May 18, science students from Baker High School helped plant ponderosa seedlings along the Skyline Road in an area burned by the Cornet-Windy Ridge fire in August 2015.

The lightning-sparked blazes, which burned together during hot, windy weather, spread over 104,000 acres, the largest wildfire in Baker County history.

Bill Mitchell and Noah Erickson, who both work in the silviculture department for the U.S. Forest Service, gave the students a quick lesson on the proper way to plant a tree.

But first came the vocabulary lesson as Mitchell quizzed the kids for the words that describe a fire that destroys everything.

After a hint, one student called it out: "Stand replacement."

"Is there a seed source left to rebuild this forest?" Mitchell asked, sweeping an arm across the landscape littered with fallen logs and skeletons of standing trees.

"There is not."

The source on this day is the students, who planted 750 ponderosa pine seedlings.

"Your goal is 20 trees each today," Mitchell said.

He and Erickson demonstrated how to dig a hole, either with a shovel or a hoe-dad — a tool with a long, flat blade, rather like a large-scale tongue depressor — that was



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

Brianna Stadler, left, and Sydney Lamb work as a team to plant ponderosa pine seedlings on May 18, 2022, in the Dooley Mountain area burned in 2015 by the Windy Ridge-Cornet Fire.

big enough for the tree's roots.

Location matters too — the students were instructed to plant by the "microsite" technique, which means finding a place, such as beside a fallen log, where the seedling would be protected from the elements.

"This is the toughest place we plant," Mitchell said. "It's dry, it's windy, it's cold."

Then it was time to load up the bags with seedlings, each first dipped in a bucket of water to give it a good start on growing.

In pairs or trios, the students hiked uphill, picking their way through charred logs and the lush green of grass, lupine and arnica.

This summer will mark seven years since the wildfire burned this portion of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

"We've planted about 2.5 million trees since the burn," Erickson said.

The survival rate, he said, can vary from 15% to 50% depending on weather conditions.

"It depends on the year," he said. "Ponderosa has the highest success."

Crews contracted with the Forest Service have planted western larch, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and western white pine.

This is Erickson's fifth year with the Wallowa-Whitman. He never saw this area cov-

ered in tall, green trees — but he has seen it coming back to life.

"I've only see Dooley like this," he said. "I've seen the growth."

Picking as well as planting

This tree-planting excursion brought out students from several different classes: general science 2, advanced biology, advanced ecology, natural resources and wilderness readiness survival.

Nicole Sullivan, who teaches science at BHS, planned the field trip to wrap up a unit on the plant kingdom.

"And we've been doing botany with all the classes," she said.

In addition to planting trees, the students hunted for morel mushrooms — in fact, the planting took a bit longer because the prized fungi kept distracting their attention.

And even though they finished the day tired with scratched skin and dirty clothes, each dirt-smudged face had a smile.

"I enjoy this," said Jaylyn Baird.

"It feels more rewarding," added Joy Murphy.

And the Forest Service, Mitchell told the group, appreciates the help.

"You guys did a solid job," he said. "That's a tough place to plant trees — the toughest we have."

Oregon forest deal wins acclaim

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Regulations that reduce Oregon's harvestable timber acreage by roughly 10% aren't a development that would normally be embraced by timber industry representatives.

Yet new rules that increase no-logging buffers around streams and impose other restrictions were celebrated Wednesday, May 18, by executives of forest product companies alongside Gov. Kate Brown and environmental advocates at an event in Portland.

The signing ceremony memorialized the Private Forest Accord, a compromise deal over forestry regulations struck by timber and environmental representatives. The agreement was enshrined in legislation passed earlier this year and signed by Brown.

"You all set aside your differences to do what is best for everyone," Brown said. "Both sides recognized the old way of doing things wasn't working."

Any decrease in the state's log supply is a hard pill for lumber and plywood manufacturers to swallow but the segment of the industry that supports Senate Bill 1501 believes it's a calculated risk: The new restrictions are meant to forestall ballot initiatives or other unpredictable disruptions to logging rules.

"There are no certainties in life, but we have a negotiated agreement that's supported by all sides," said Eric Geyer, strategic business development director for Roseburg Forest Products. "I'm confident we will have regulatory certainty for the elements that were negotiated."

This regulatory certainty is generally cited as a key benefit to foresters, loggers, landowners and manufacturers, but detractors in the timber industry view the term as unrealistically optimistic.

Critics say the regulations don't actually prevent environmental advocates from filing lawsuits or seeking ballot initiatives, either immediately or years from now.

"One must suspend disbelief that the greens will not sue in the future. History says otherwise," said Rob Freres, president of Freres Lumber. "Surrogates and newly formed organizations will be used to circumvent the agreement."

Meanwhile, the timber investment management organizations and real estate investment trusts that agreed to the restrictions will eventually divest their Oregon forestlands, "avoiding the harm they have caused," he said.

The larger buffer zones around waterways, which depend on stream type, are a major component of the deal and have come under fire for rendering valuable standing timber on private land effectively worthless.

Aside from no-harvest buffers expanding, the legislation imposes restrictions on beaver trapping, road building and steep slope logging.

Industry estimates peg the statewide

impact as a 10% cut in harvestable timber acreage, which will roughly correlate with a decrease in lumber and plywood production and all the mill closures or curtailments that entails, critics say.

The effect will be particularly burdensome for landowners with many streams on their properties, including small woodland owners who don't own vast acreages spread out over upland, lowland and riparian areas, according to detractors.

Supporters of the deal in the timber industry say it ensures future regulations under the state's Forest Practices Act will be guided by an "adaptive management process" that relies on research rather than political maneuvering.

"Any changes to the Forest Practices Act will be based on sound science," said Chris Edwards, executive director of the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, a timber group. "The science will lead us to agreements."

Environmental groups that signed onto the deal say their public show of support will deflate any future efforts to change the law through ballot initiatives, given the broad-based consensus behind the new rules.

"It becomes harder for someone to mount external efforts at the ballot to do something different," said Sean Stevens, executive director of the Oregon Wild nonprofit. "There will be a little bit of stasis that comes from this."

If the federal government approves the deal's regulations under a "habitat conservation plan" for threatened and endangered aquatic species, it would protect against lawsuits alleging landowners unlawfully harmed them and their habitat.

"That gives them a shield from liability," said Ralph Bloemers, co-founder of the Crag Law Center.

Even so, the habitat conservation plan must first be approved by federal authorities through a public process, and its protections don't extend to terrestrial species such as the spotted owl. The plan also doesn't apply to liability under the Clean Water Act.

Though a representative of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association helped craft the deal, critics have accused the agreement's signatories of deliberating behind closed doors without input from the public.

Small woodland owners won't be held to the same standards under the legislation as industrial forest owners but the regulations will still be more stringent than they are now. The state's Board of Forestry must implement the new rules before December.

Under companion legislation, Senate Bill 1502, small woodland owners with fewer than 5,000 acres who abide by the stricter industrial standards can obtain tax credits to compensate for the loss in revenues.

Small woodland owners are more likely to live in the "wildland-urban interface" and thus the significant reduction in their property's timber value will create pressure to convert these forests to residential or other uses, according to detractors.

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