

AND TO ASHES AGAIN



1996 SPRING FIRE, DOUGLAS COUNTY, 16,000 ACRES, JUNE 2007

Of the lands burned, 10,000 acres were in the Boulder Creek Wilderness Area and most of the other 6,000 was Late Successional Reserve, Inventoried Roadless Area and Spotted Owl habitat. This picture, taken 11 years after the fire, is the view from the road looking into the LSR Roadless Area. The fire-dependent brush is 4 feet to 8 feet tall, concealing much of the fallen dead wood. Despite the density of snags and extreme volume of dead wood over thousands of acres – all fuel for future fires – no wood was removed. Several years after the fire, plans to replant were scrubbed due to extreme overhead hazard of hundreds of snags per acre. All scientific and fire models predict extreme fire hazard within and beyond the entire fire area. This scene sparked Communities for Healthy Forests into action.

IN THE JANUARY 2006 BRAINSTORMNW, I REPORTED on a survey of the landscapes left behind by the 1996 Spring Fire and the 2002 Apple Fire, both of which occurred on the Umpqua National Forest east of Roseburg. Of the Spring Fire in particular, I had the following to say:

We beheld a landscape of despair. Nearly 10 years after the burn, not a seedling has sprouted. Beneath the hulking, blackened trunks of once-majestic timber is a tangle of dense, combustible brush about 5 feet thick. You cannot see the ground through this brush. Not anywhere. It will burn again the next time summer dry lightning touches down in the right place. The dead timber will topple and burn as well. New brush will come up in its place, then burn again. Conifer forest will not return to the area, at least for a couple of centuries. Sixteen-thousand acres that was a resplendent stand of fir, hemlock, pine, and cedar nine years ago will not be seen again by anyone alive today. "Insane" does not begin to describe the situation.

There are times when I don't care to be right, and last August was one of them. That's when lightning sparked the Rattle Fire, burning 20,000 acres before fall rain and snow arrived in late September. Much of the Spring Fire landscape described above did indeed reburn. The tangle of thick brush and fallen trees went up like rocket fuel, so hot it sterilized the soil. The snags that remained from the 1996 fire burned again, although a surprising number remain for the next round. Less than one-sixth of the Boulder Creek Wilderness Area remains

unburned but ripe for the next catastrophic event. The local school, power transmission lines and the major highway over the Cascades to Crater Lake National Park were closed and then placed on alert for weeks after they reopened.

We've heard from the environmental community that salvaging timber killed in wildfires is akin to "mugging a burn victim." Those of us accustomed to the rhetoric put forth by these Luddite losers who worship what are, after all, very large plants, can dismiss this sort of silly hyperbole. On the whole, the movement is populated by poets, fantasists and the tire-somely self-righteous who have never made the great leap from adolescence. It is funded by folks who think lumber comes from Home Depot and food comes from Trader Joe's.

But sinking to their level for a brief moment, what happened to the area of the Spring Fire last August was akin to — well — burning a burn victim. The wholesale waste of valuable resources that occurs when an area destroyed by wildfire is left to rot and reburn should be sickening to any thinking person, particularly when it occurs in an area wracked by unemployment and crumbling industrial infrastructure. There isn't another country on Earth that would allow this to happen, nor one that would even conceive of it. None, it would seem, are rich enough to be this wasteful.

We've also heard from our misanthropic activist children that forests destroyed by these infernos will regenerate on their own. They will not — at least not within any time frame that our society could possibly deem acceptable. The fires we've been wit-



2008 RATTLE FIRE, DOUGLAS COUNTY, 20,000 ACRES, OCTOBER 2008

This is a view of the same area as the previous photo, demonstrated by the red arrows and dots on two remaining root wads in both pictures. The Rattle Fire was ignited by a single lightning strike within the Boulder Creek Wilderness. As predicted, an intense reburn of the Spring Fire occurred. Hundreds of snags per acre over thousands of acres, lack of escape routes, lack of access, and extremely high fuel loads presented hazards to firefighters. Direct attack on the fire was impossible and the burned area expanded into green old growth forest. These same hazards remain after the Rattle Fire, setting up prime conditions for future catastrophic reburns.

nessing in recent years are “natural” only in the sense that most of them are caused by lightning. The intensity with which they burn is anything but natural. The fuel loading that has accumulated through decades of fire suppression and overstocking causes them to burn hotter than the sort of low-intensity ground fires that occurred naturally in centuries past. Those fires were good for the forests, helping to revitalize the soil and control brush and fuel loads. The fires we’ve seen in this decade — fires with names like Biscuit, the B&B Complex, Black Crater, Blossom, Rattle, and others — are infinitely more destructive and leave behind far more lasting damage, not to mention a devastated rural economy.

When I wrote the earlier article, Congressmen Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and Greg Walden (R-Ore.) had introduced legislation to address this very sort of catastrophe in a modest, environmentally responsible manner that recognized the narrow window for recovering burned timber while it remains merchantable. If the 2006 election killed this legislation, the 2008 election buried it under a mudslide which, unlike those that occur after wildfires, was only metaphorical. Activists have been so successful at vilifying the very concept of rapid salvage and reforestation after a fire that even its advocates have taken to avoiding use of the “S” word, opting instead for “post-catastrophic restoration” or others equally cumbersome. This is quite a feat for a word that inherently and in all normal usage has nothing but the most positive connotations. We salvage relationships, bad situations, shipwrecks, and teenagers who’ve taken the wrong path without the slightest suspicion we’re doing anything but right. Yet where timber is concerned, insipid

doggerel of the “mugging a burn victim” variety and “studies” by a few renegade “scientists” at the OSU College of Forestry have corrupted the debate in academic and policymaking circles.

At least the public still gets it. According to polling, 75 percent of the public favor responsible post-fire salvage logging, not that their opinions are heeded in the least by the oligarchs making the rules. It’s easier for the latter to simply raise the former’s taxes, particularly in a state in which Democrats can’t seem to lose elections.

Neither what happens after prompt, decisive salvaging of burned timber nor what happens after we do nothing is even remotely theoretical at this point. When the half million acres we now call the Tillamook State Forest burned up throughout the 1930s and into the 1950s, timber sales were marked out while trees were still smoking, and salvage was pursued far more aggressively than would have been the case under current forest practices. Today we have ... the Tillamook State Forest. By any measure, it is healthy, vibrant, growing at a stunning rate, and beloved by environmentalists and every other Oregonian who ventures outdoors.

The areas destroyed by the Spring Fire, the Apple Fire and now the Rattle Fire are landscapes of devastation. They’re covered with flammable brush, slide-prone, and loaded with dangerous snags that can fall or drop deadly branches. Trails through them are closed. And all are a spark away from burning — again.

Radical activists clamor to achieve their Marxist dream of bringing industrial civilization to heel and killing capitalism by a thousand cuts with Orwellian hysteria over anthropogenic global climate change.

TO ASHES (CONT.)

Does it not strike anyone as odd that these same activists are content to let hundreds of thousands of acres of burned timber either rot and be consumed by termites, which releases staggering quantities of carbon dioxide and methane (far worse as greenhouse gasses go) into the atmosphere, or reburn, which does the same thing only faster?

Dead wood has only three options: the two just mentioned,

or being turned into a building product. As such, it tends to reside in buildings for upwards of a hundred years or longer, storing the carbon and methane it would otherwise release. To one unmoved by economic arguments against waste of a valuable resource, the climate change angle should at least be compelling. It is not for the same reason that all of the other arguments fall on deaf ears: The timber industry is hated by

these activists who want it to die. Anything that might ensure its continued viability is therefore, ipso facto, to be resisted. The same is apparently true for the rural communities the industry once sustained.

Meanwhile our sitting governor has seen yet another extension of appropriations under the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act ("Safety Net") pass against long odds, and this time the patch will see him to the end of his second and final term. He now has no political incentive to act in order to secure a more lasting and stable revenue source for rural Oregon schools and local government services. It will be the next governor's problem, and he has the luxury to take potshots at the only potential (and at that, partial) solution anywhere on the horizon, the Western Oregon Plan Revision (WOPR). With salvage off the table, WOPR has the potential to generate a bit over half a billion feet of timber volume annually off of the uniquely situated O&C Lands. This is, to be sure, a mere fraction of what burns up every year, but it's something.

The governor's response to WOPR? It doesn't adequately discuss global climate change. This is the frivolity we can always expect from an ensconced politician who knows he can win re-election without any support from natural resource industries and rural Oregon and who, in any case, is not facing re-election. It can certainly be expected from a glad-handing nonentity whose party has an invulnerable death grip on Oregon politics. The plight of rural Oregon affects him in no measurable way, so he can afford to be whimsical while the grownups grapple with ever dwindling options. □


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