

Fall Issue 2012

OREGON **Fish & Wildlife** JOURNAL

Forest Fires Don't Just Burn Trees



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About Our Cover



From Doc Hastings, Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee, "This 4th of July I would like to honor our firemen and our foresters who work hard to protect our natural resources. This photo is from the Colorado fire when it overwhelmed entire neighborhoods this summer.

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Furthering The Concept Of Multiple-Use Of Our Lands



Predictable And Preventable!

Oregon's 2012 Wildfires

By Dr. Bob Zybach

Photo by Gary Sampson Jr. on the August 25, 2012 fire Waterfalls 2 Burnout
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3165/3/>

This article is the promised follow-up to the Oregon wildfire predictions published in the Summer 2012 issue of Oregon Fish & Wildfire Journal (“Predicting Oregon’s 2012 Major Wildfire Events”). It is being written on September 13, 2012, as the current Oregon wildfire season appears to be mostly drawing to an end. However, late September has often been a time of rapid expansion in

size of earlier, persistent wildfires and occasionally a time of new wildfire events, such as the Pole Creek Fire that started on September 9 (see Map and Table). Most local hunting seasons begin in early October and have -- when combined with the right weather conditions -- also contributed to expansion of existing wildfires and creation of new starts in past years.

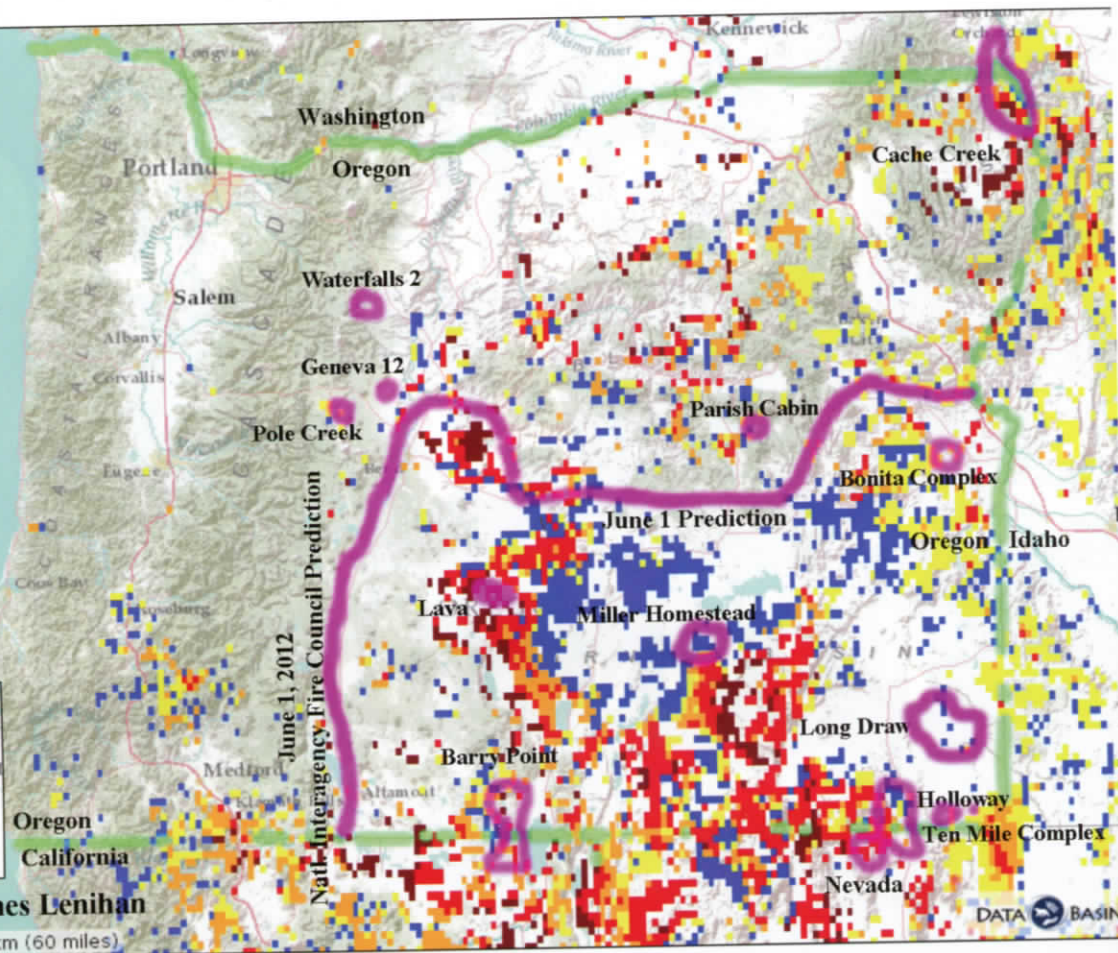
OREGON
MCI DGVM fire
potential consensus
forecast January-
September 2012
(number of weather
forecasts resulting
in high potential)



Data Analyst: James Lenihan

0 96 km (60 miles)

Created by: Dominique Bachelet, 2012



Wildfire Name	Cause	Location	Started	Total Acres
Miller Homestead	Lightning	Burns BLM	July 8	160,853
Long Draw	Lightning	Vale BLM	July 8	557,648
Bonita Complex	Lightning	Vale BLM	July 9	18,188
Lava	Lightning	Lakeview BLM	July 23	21,300
Waterfalls 2	Lightning	Warm Springs Res.	August 4	12,265
Holloway	Lightning	Winnemucca BLM	August 5	461,047
Barry Point	Lightning	Fremont-Winema NF	August 6	93,071
Geneva 12	Lightning	Ochoco NF	August 6	1,337
Ten Mile Complex	Lightning	Vale BLM	August 10	14,036
Cache Creek	Lightning	Wallowa-Whitman NF	August 20	73,697
Parish Cabin	Human	Malheur NF	August 28	6,481
Pole Creek	Unknown	Deschutes NF	September 9	4,583

This year's predictions were based on the historical record of major wildfires in Oregon, beginning in the 1840s; an historical map of lightning-caused fires in Oregon between 1928 and 1932; and two recent predictive maps of this season's events, the first provided by the National Interagency Fire Council on June 1, 2012; and the second by a consortium of US Forest Service, PNW Research Station, and Conservation Biology Institute staff via the Data Basin website (<http://databasin.org>) on June 8-9, 2012 (also the basis for the current annotated map).

Initial indications are that the predictions provided by these disparate sources have been remarkably accurate and generally consistent with one another. The bottom line predictions provided by these combined methods were:

1) Large-scale wildfires, if they occurred, were most likely to take place in eastern Oregon from July through October, and in western Oregon during August and September;

2) The greatest likelihood for the occurrence of major (over 1,000 acres) or catastrophic-scale (more than

100,000 acres) wildfires was the Great Basin region of southeast Oregon -- and with lesser likelihoods of such fires occurring in the central Oregon Bend-Prineville area of the eastern Cascades and Ochoco Mountains, and in the

northeast corner of the State, along Hells Canyon;

3) Conversely, the least likelihood of major wildfires was in western Oregon, where risk appeared relatively low and, at best, no greater than "Normal."



The Holloway Fire in Oregon seen from the air on August 11 (Credit: Holloway Fire)
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3113/61/>



Backside: A view from Holloway Fire burned area Photo by Dave Toney. <http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3113/81/>



Fire crew uses hand tools on Holloway Fire in dead grass Photo by Keith Mardis.
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3113/22/>

So, how accurate were the predictions?

The Table lists 12 major wildfires and their relative sizes – so far -- for the 2012 Oregon wildfire season. This information was obtained from “InciWeb” (<http://www.inciweb.org>), the federal interagency website created to provide the public and the “Public Affairs community” with a single source of reliable, standardized information regarding all of the nation’s wildfire “incidents” during the course of a year. InciWeb is also the source of photographs used in this article to illustrate this year’s fires and ground-based fire containment methods.

The Map, an annotated version of the June 8-9 predictive map used in the previous article of this series, shows the relative size and location of each of these fires as of September 13 (Pole Creek has increased in

size since then). At this time, according to the InciWeb website, 11 fires are still classified as “Active” -- although most of the updated fire reports have been listing the same stable acreage figures for several weeks or longer. Only the Parish Cabin fire is considered “Inactive” at this time.

The Table and Map also illustrate the precision of this year’s predictions – however much “luck” (good and bad) may have had to do with this result: 1) 11 of these fires took place in July or August and one has occurred so far in September, as predicted; 2) the very largest fires have taken place within, or on the perimeter of, the Great Basin, as predicted, and in addition to the 74,000-acre Cache Creek Fire located along Hells Canyon in northeast Oregon -- also as predicted; and 3) there have been relatively few wildfires in western



Stringer of conifers torching, Cache Creek Fire. Photo by Ewert.
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3202/9/>



Barry Point Fire fuel load burning, August 7. Photo by Fred Way.
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3105/23/>

Oregon this year, and none of a major size or concern. Again, as predicted. Therefore, this year's major wildfires have all occurred when and where they were predicted to take place -- and have not occurred, so far, in areas in which they were not expected to take place.

In sum, the predictions have been highly accurate, bordering on precise, so far as time and place have been concerned. It is the size of these fires that has been somewhat surprising, with just two of them alone (the Long Branch and the Holloway) totaling more than 1,000,000 acres in size, including a large portion of the latter fire in neighboring Nevada.

When, exactly, did these fires take place?


The largest wildfires in southeast Oregon history began burning on July 8 and 9, ignited by a lightning storm, and on August 6 -10 in the same general area, also started by lightning. In all, four major fires started in July (758,000 acres); eight major fires began in August (662,000 acres); only one major fire so far, Pole Creek, started in September (24,000 acres); and all but one are considered "Active" at this time. This pattern of July to October wildfires in Oregon has been firmly in place for at least 235 years, probably much longer, and seems entirely unrelated to recent claims of Global

Warming or "climate change" as affecting wildfire seasonality.

Where, according to ownership, did these fires take place?

Six of these fires began on USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, totaling 1,233,000 acres and averaging 205,000+ acres in size; five began on USDA Forest Service (USFS) lands, totaling 199,000 acres and averaging 39,800 acres in size; and one started on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, totaling more than 12,000 acres in size. All of the July fires started on BLM land, with the most recent BLM fire starting on August 10. The Warm Springs fire started August 4, and all five USFS fires started from August 5 through September 9.

The strong correlation between government land ownership patterns and wildfire starting dates is interesting, and probably related more to fuel types than to management practices. Conversely, the strong correlation between land ownership type (federal government vs. private, state, and tribal) and major wildfire occurrences is probably due more to management practices than to anything else -- and which accounts in very large part for the predictability of these events.



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Pole Creek Fire: View from Incident Command Post at Sisters Rodeo Ground as temperature inversion blankets Sisters, Oregon in smoke. Photo by Oregon Incident Management Team 4.
<http://www.inciweb.org/incident/photograph/3244/5/>

How severe were these fires?

Wildfires are often described in terms of “intensity” and “severity.” Intensity is often described in measurements of fire temperature, flame length, and other considerations of the fuel being consumed, how

quickly, under what conditions, and with what immediate results. Typically, this is mostly a consideration of fire heat and the speed and degree in which fuels are consumed; factors dependent on fuel type, ambient temperature, humidity, and local weather conditions at the

time and place of the fire.

Severity, on the other hand, is usually little more than a measure of fire-related mortality, particularly in regards to vegetation. Did the fire kill everything in sight, including trees, shrubs, forbs, grasses, and lingering bugs and other wildlife? Very severe. Or did it skip around, sometimes crowning (and killing trees, but maybe sparing understory shrubs and animals) and sometimes skipping from place to place, or burning at relatively low temperatures as it moved along the ground? Moderate severity. Or did the fire mostly just move through an area, consuming dead grasses and some shrubs and bugs in its path, maybe doing more good than harm in those regards? Low severity.

This year's Long Draw Fire, at 558,000 acres, is the largest wildfire, measured in acres, in Oregon history; the 2012 Holloway Fire, at 461,047 acres, is the third largest such fire -- the 2002 Biscuit Fire, at 495,000 acres in southwest Oregon, being the only other historic wildfire of such magnitude as these two. A big difference between these events, however, is the amount of fuel consumed -- off-hand I would guess that 10 times as much fuel, maybe more, burned in the Biscuit Fire as burned in the Long Draw and Holloway fires combined. A quick study of the photographs used to illustrate this article reveal why: major portions of this year's fires burned across grasslands and shrublands containing only a few tons of fuel per acre, while the Biscuit Fire -- in common with most western Oregon wildfires of similar magnitude -- burned through millions of tons of fuels in the forms of massive conifer trees, pitch-soaked snags, large woody debris, and highly flammable shrubs.

Much of the 2002 Biscuit Fire burned at high intensity and resulted in great mortality of plants and animals; many of this year's fires burned at relatively low severity and may actually result in several rejuvenated grasslands and shrub populations -- and the animals that feed upon them and use them as shelter -- as a result. However, it must be pointed out that the majority of lands suffered serious damage and that the costs and problems associated with treating grasslands and shrub populations with prescribed fires instead of waiting for lightning ignitions are significantly safer, cheaper, and less destructive than the risky, chaotic decisions and practices used to manage wildfires.

Summary

The 2012 wildfire season is still in progress as this is being written, but is already among the worst in Oregon history. At this time more than 1,444,000 acres

have been burned in the twelve 1,000+ acre fires profiled in this article; the large majority of this acreage is located within the State, but also includes relatively minor amounts in the adjacent states of California (Barry Point Fire), Nevada (Holloway Fire), and Washington (Cache Creek Fire).

These fires, for the most part, were easily predicted. Those predictions were based largely upon historical weather patterns and current fuel patterns. A common observation is that people always talk about the weather, but they never do anything about it -- mostly because we can't, and no matter how hard we may try. Fuel is something else, and it is something that can be (and usually is) managed at one level or another by most people in most times and in most places.

Wildfire fuels in Oregon are generally comprised of pitchy trees (conifers), snags (dead standing trees), shrubs, dead wood, grasses, and litter. The management of these vegetation types, historically, has been primarily achieved via logging, prescribed fire, grazing, pruning, gathering, mowing, irrigation, and other methods typically associated with the growth, maintenance, and harvesting of food, fiber, and fuel products useful to people. The resulting cultural landscapes then form the basis of "wildlife habitat" for the native plants and animals that have best adapted to these practices.

This article documents the predictability of wildfires, using criteria that applies to both Oregon and to much of the remainder of the forests and grasslands west of the Rocky Mountains in North America. Because a major portion of such predictability is based on existing fuel loads, active management of those fuels can mitigate these fires. The first article in this series ("Forest Restoration: Problems & Opportunities," Spring 2012 Oregon Fish & Wildlife Journal) describes how that can be accomplished, to the advantage of America's rural communities and with little or no cost to most taxpayers.

These fires are deadly, dangerous, costly, ugly, unhealthy, and unacceptable. They are also avoidable. Something needs to be done to put an end to this nonsense, in my opinion. This series of articles offers a method and a means for doing so.

Author: Dr. Bob Zybach is a fifth-generation Oregonian and a forester and forest scientist with a long career in the woods of the Pacific Northwest. He has a PhD in Environmental Sciences from OSU and has been Program Manager for Oregon Websites and Watersheds Project, Inc. (www.ORWW.org) since its formation in 1996.

