

Fall Issue 2014

OREGON Fish & Wildlife JOURNAL



**Furthering The Concept of Multiple-Use of Our Lands
For More Than 35 Years!**

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See more on the Dueling Grizzlies photographed by Shogo Asao on page 7.

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Global Warming and Oregon Wildfire History

Interview with Dr. Bob Zybach

From the Lars Larson Radio Show, July 29, 2014

Transcribed by Nana Lapham

Human interference — such as politics and modern techniques to protect forests from blazes — allows tree parasites to lay waste to 90,000 acres of the Deschutes and Willamette national forests.

A natural disaster runs amok

By Theresa Novak
The Statesman Journal

Tiny worms and voracious beetles that have decimated almost 90,000 acres of trees are almost gone. Many of the dead trees they left behind soon will be gone, too.

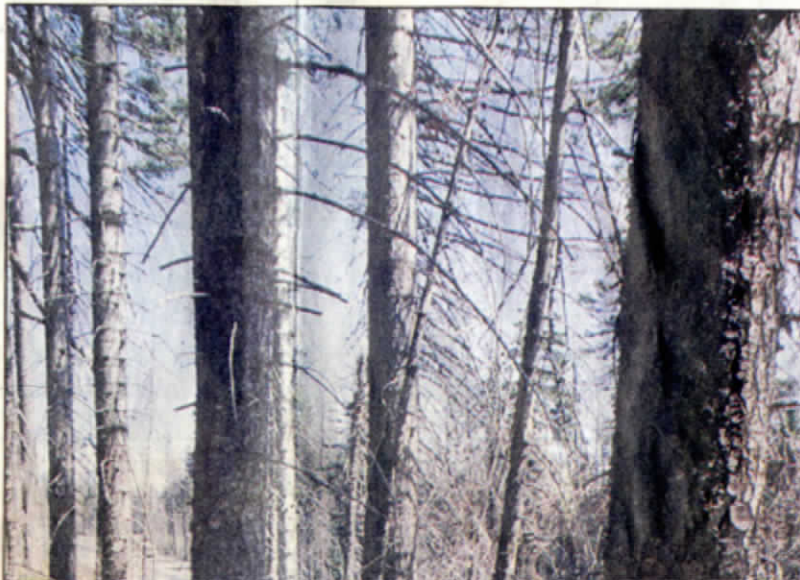
For the first time in almost four years, the U.S. Forest Service will sell salvage timber sales on the Sisters and McKenzie ranger districts. There, drought and infestation by spruce budworms and bark beetles have killed a vast number of trees in an area bisected by the Santiam Pass.

The damaged area crosses over two federal forests and encompasses some private timberland. Most of the damage is in the Deschutes National Forest, with a smaller portion in the Willamette National Forest near Suttle Lake.

Rich Mathis, who has owned the Suttle Lake resort for three years, said it is about time that the Forest Service did some-

ENVIRONMENT

Insects have killed 70,000 to 90,000 acres of Douglas fir trees in this area.



September 3, 1994 Salem Statesman Journal article describing 90,000 acres of beetle killed US Forest Service land along Highway 20 and the Santiam Pass.

In the summer 2013 issue of Oregon Fish & Wildlife Journal I wrote an article about the “science” behind spotted owl listings and current federal forest management policies. In late July, about a month after the article first appeared, Lars Larson interviewed me about its content on his popular radio show. Almost exactly one year later -- to the day and hour -- I was on Lars’ radio show again, this time regarding recent news statements by “top government officials”

regarding forest fires and global warming.

I have been interviewed by Lars five or six times over the course of the past 12 or so years, beginning sometime in 2002 with an interview that was also likely about forest fires; perhaps the Biscuit Fire of that year. Recently, two members of Lars’ staff, Tony King and Brandon Christensen, located and sent me audio MP3 recordings of my two most recent interviews. My long-time research associate at www.

ORWW.org, Nana Lapham, then transcribed both so they could be made available online.

So now we are making an article from a Lars Larson interview, rather than being interviewed about an article. The following transcript is significantly shortened, mostly to the advantage of my own statements and the detriment of insightful comments and observations Lars is making regarding climate change and forest management. The full interview, in both aural MP3 files and PDF transcriptions,

was mentioning that he had visited the High Desert Museum and he was interviewed by KTVZ, just so we get all the credit in and he said because of climate change and biomass, wildfires are different now than they were ten years ago. And a direct quote from Tidwell, 'Our fire seasons today are 60 to 80 days longer, which creates more energy in the system.' Tidwell told News Channel 21, 'We see more erratic fire behavior.' Let's start with the length of the fire season and I want to ask you first. You did your PhD thesis on this



March-April 1994 Evergreen Magazine interview with predictions of catastrophic wildfire in untended forests in the western US, but specifically referencing the Santiam Pass and the Silver Complex burn areas that became the B&B Complex and the Biscuit Fire - each the largest in history for their region.

can be found at www.NWMapsCo.com

LL: Welcome back to the Lars Larson Show. You know that we talk about global warming issues on this show on a pretty regular basis and we love to have people on both sides of the question on ... Bob, good to have you back on and thank you very much for taking the time today.

BZ: Well thank you, Lars. I enjoy it.

LL: Tom Tidwell is the U.S. Forest Service Chief and it

subject, right?

BZ: Yes, on the history of Coast Range wildfires, but . . . the last 20 or 30 years, I've looked very closely at the history of wildfires in the Pacific Northwest.

LL: Are the fire seasons two to two and a half months longer than they used to be?

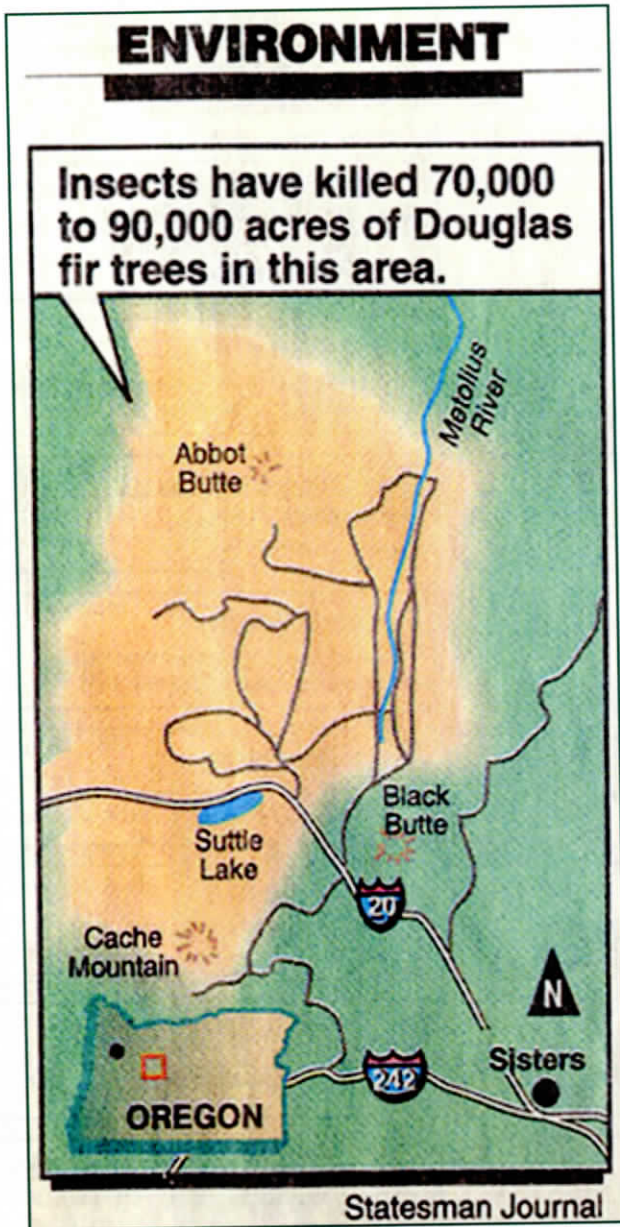
BZ: No, they are about exactly the same for the last 200 years.

LL: [Laughs] That's quite a statement. So for 200 years, we've had fire seasons about the same length. Why do you suppose the U.S. Forest Service Chief, Tom Tidwell, is saying then that they are two to two and a half months longer?

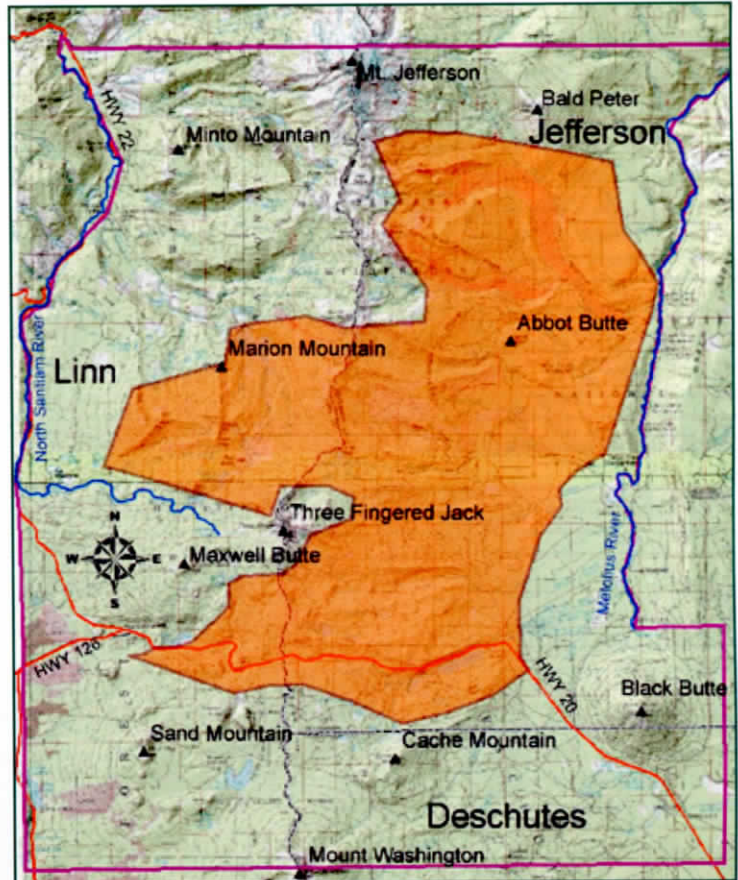
BZ: Well maybe because he is following lead of President Obama, who said last week up in Washington that the

BZ: Well I don't know if it is one of the lowest on record, and I don't know how they are measuring "normal," but the last ten years have been terrible and the last 20 years have been terrible. Actually going back to about 1987. But these fires were predicted more than 20 years ago by Chad Oliver up at University of Washington (he's at Yale now), by myself, by Jim Peterson, who has Evergreen Magazine -- which was nationally distributed -- that the build-up of fuels caused by passive management of our forests was going to result in massive forest fires and that's exactly what has occurred.

LL: . . . Is it warmer today than it was ten years ago or



1994 newspaper article map showing 90,000 acres of dead trees on the Santiam Pass. Note the locations of the same landmarks. Map color choice was complete coincidence.



2004 ORWW website report on the B&B Complex showing 90,000 acre fire boundaries. Note the locations of the same landmarks. Map color choice was complete coincidence.

wildfires are due to "climate change." I think they have agendas to support. I think it's political. It's not scientific and that's what bothers me.

LL: They say outside of the west coast . . . burn acreage so far this year in the United States is the lowest in a decade, less than half of normal and one of the lowest on record.

cooler or about the same temperature?

BZ: I think the records are showing that in the northwest we've got generally cooling temperatures for the last 15 or 17 years. As far as the seasonality of wildfires, they're pretty darn predictable. July and August are the big months. Have been since the 1820s. Sometimes it will start a little bit earlier in June or early July in eastern Oregon, because it dries out sooner. But western Oregon, about now [late July] until mid-August is when it gets its worst and then they usually taper off in September. There's some starts there, and then

the rains hit them and that's been the same pattern as long as we've had historical records. It has not changed.

LL: . . . When Tidwell says something like that and says the fire seasons are longer today than they used to be .

. . . You know, small, relatively small changes in temperature are not going to make the difference between say the Coast Range where it's wet and damp and central Oregon where it's bone dry all summer, is it?

BZ: Not even ten or 20 degrees. We had the wildfires here in February and March. It depends on humidity and the wind. You get an east wind and low humidity and the fuels dry out. So fuel build-ups are a result, in Oregon, of spring rains. That's where you get your vegetation build up: or management policies that say don't salvage dead material; or let things grow and don't log, say, in forests; or don't

graze on the prairies. So it's not a matter of temperature at all. It's humidity and wind and it's fuel. And then it's a source of ignition; and since we have lightning strikes -- not on the Coast Range, but southwest Oregon, eastern Oregon and along the Cascades -- at this time of year, it's predictable that when they strike fuels, they will burn. If we have an east

wind and low humidity they get out of control really quickly. But the temperature doesn't have anything to do with the length of fire season and the main thing that controls the annual fuels, the ones that are particularly combustible, are

the spring rains, so you get big heavy grass build ups and a lot of [woody] growth.

LL:

On the subject of fire seasons, so we have the head of the U.S. Forest Service saying that we have a longer fire season by 60 to 80 days . . . Let's talk about the fuel load . . . Give me your take on that first, if you don't mind, Doc?

BZ:

Sure. This probably started -- the fuel load problem that has led into the wildfires -- probably started with the Wilderness Act. A lot of Wilderness areas included timber. The Kalmiopsis in southern Oregon is a good example. In 1987 it burned, there was no salvage because it was a Wilder-

ness area. The Jefferson Wilderness area had beetle-kill in the early 90s. In both those instances, myself and other people said these are going to burn up catastrophically if something isn't done to remove these now dry fuels. Anybody that has used wood heat knows that dry wood burns better than green wood. And then point of fact, they



Fall 2003 cover of Oregon Fish & Wildlife Journal. Showing sign posted in 1994 and published in the Fall 1994 Issue, warning drivers of beetle kill area to the point of trees potentially falling.

both did. The B&B Complex burned up almost the exact perimeter of the beetle-kill on the crest of the Cascades in [2003]. The [previous] year, the Biscuit fire burned up the Kalmiopsis again, took out the entire Silver Complex fire that had burned there in 1987, and expanded the boundaries to about 500 thousand acres. So those things were predicted before we had a global warming problem, or about the same time. People, myself included, were saying these

“... we’ve exacerbated the problem by two things: [1] we’ve created a wildlife habitat for spotted owls, which is burning up for the same reason the fuels are building up and there’s nothing to control them; and [2] the other reason is lack of salvage. We are not salvaging the areas that have been killed and so we are piling up the dry firewood in those areas and as a result the fires are, as predicted 20 years ago, becoming larger and more destructive.”

are time bombs; these fuels are going to go out of control. Since then, we’ve exacerbated the problem by two things: [1] we’ve created a wildlife habitat for spotted owls, which is burning up for the same reason -- the fuels are building up and there’s nothing to control them; and [2] the other reason is lack of salvage. We are not salvaging the areas that have been killed and so we are piling up the dry firewood in those areas and as a result the fires are, as predicted 20 years ago, becoming larger and more destructive.

LL: And when they talk about trying to ameliorate this through thinning projects . . . That doesn’t actually solve the problem, or probably even reduce it, does it?

BZ: Not a bit . . . I’ve seen a lot of those projects and they are pretty irritating. They are just busy work. Before I went back to college, I worked for 20 years in reforestation, so we did lots of reforestation work throughout the Pacific Northwest and by removing fuels, by putting in road systems, by using aerial surveillance and so on, we were able to keep wildfires at bay from the end of World War II say, until the 1980s and until the Federal government started putting in passive management policies. The thinning projects they put in are silly, almost. They encourage the remaining trees to grow [greater amounts of fuel]. They are more like precommercial thins or leaf-raking, almost literally, than they are anything that needs to be done. We need to go in and be very aggressive and actively manage the major fuels, which are logs, which also create jobs, which also create income, which also create safer conditions for fish and wildlife and less air pollution and less water pollution.

LL: And if you do that, and you, you know in the process of logging, you are knocking off the limbs, you take the limbs and grind them up, I don’t know how much commercial value that grind is, but there are markets for some of that stuff and if you take the rest of it and burn it . . . you should be able to do all that and actually improve the forest, rather than just let it build up, until it’s feet thick and then a


fire starts and the fire sits there and burns through this fuel from now till the rains hit.

BZ: And chars the soils and sterilizes it and it sloughs off in the rivers and the whole bit; and creates a lot of carbon dioxide in the process for the people that are worried about that. The way the Indians did it for ten thousand years or so is to have regular prescribed burns and so the fuels never built up and the nutrients that go into

the soil or the ash from the plants that [burned] – the flash fuels mostly -- and those are the forests that are uniformly described as Eden-like by the first explorers and settlers that came to Oregon. The forests were safe. They were beautiful. They were highly productive. Wildlife was productive. So a combination of logging to get rid of all the fuel build ups of the last 30 and 50 years -- but done along the watershed boundaries and on a landscape scale -- combined with prescribed fires as the Indians did, would pretty much resolve the problem as well as rejuvenating our rural economies and our wildlife populations.

LL: . . . Dr. Zybach, I appreciate you coming on. We are going to have some links up to some of the material that you have and you always bring a lot of intelligence to the show. Thanks very much.

BZ: Thank you Lars.

LL: You bet you. Dr. Bob Zybach with me. You’ve got the Lars Larson Show. 

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