

Winter Issue 2021

OREGON **Fish & Wildlife** JOURNAL



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This issue's cover is of Nathaniel Farm's 1st Chinook!

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The most deadly, destructive, and widespread catastrophic-scale forest fires in Oregon's history erupted on Labor Day 2020, driven by strong east winds.

Unless we change how our national and state forests are managed, these events will be just one more chapter in this age of predictable, increasing, and ever-greater firestorms.

I've spent my career studying forest fires and forest health. In a 2018 Daily Caller interview, a few weeks before the California Camp Fire destroyed the town of Paradise, I said: "You take away logging, grazing and maintenance, and you get firebombs." Then someone took my quote, put it on a forest fire photo, and posted it from the ruins of Paradise. The resulting meme quickly went viral on Facebook.

This September, Facebook began flagging this post as "partly false" because my quote, and related interview, didn't mention climate change. That is because my documented predictions, based on significant research and personal experience, do not consider changing climate, in order to be accurate.

The broad arc of Oregon's fire history explains why this year's catastrophic wildfires have converted our public forests into unprecedented firebombs. What were once green trees filled with water, have now become massive stands of pitchy, air-dried firewood.

For thousands of years ancestral Indian families kept ridgeline and riparian areas open for travel, hunting, fishing, and harvesting purposes. They cleared ground fuels by constant firewood gathering, root harvesting, and seasonal fires.

These actions created widespread systematic firebreaks in a beautiful landscape characterized by foot trails, grass prairies, southern balds, huckleberry fields, camas meadows, oak savannah, and islands of mostly even-aged conifers.

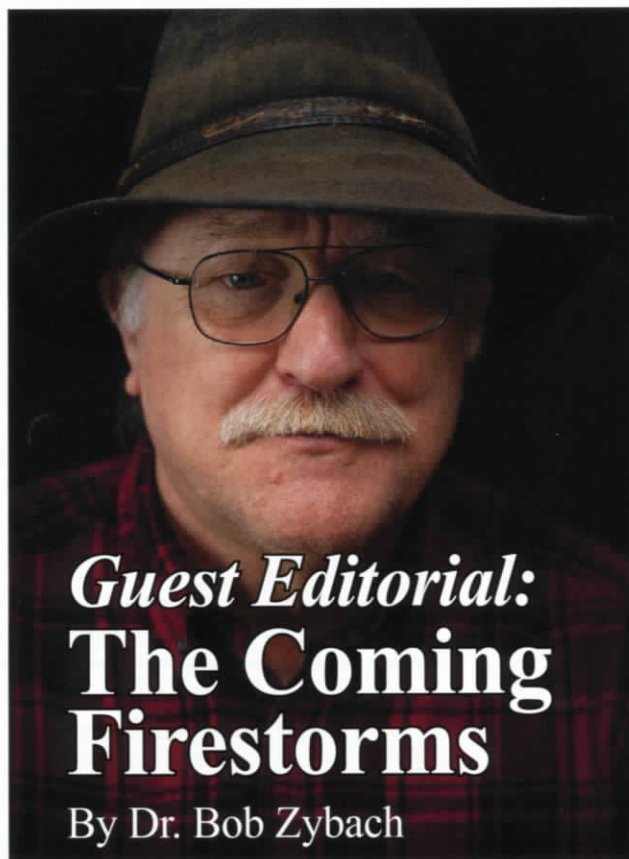
Following the historic 1910 firestorms, the US Forest Service established a nationwide network of fire lookouts and pack trails backed up by rapid response fire suppression. This system became remarkably effective over time.

From 1952 until 1987, for 35 years, only one forest fire in all of western Oregon was greater than 10,000 acres: the 1966 43,000-acre Oxbow Fire in Lane County.

But since 1987, the past 34 years, Oregon has had more than 30 such fires, with several larger than 100,000 acres.

The 2020 Labor Day Fires alone covered more than one million acres, destroyed over 4,000 homes, caused 40,000 emergency evacuations, killed millions of wild animals, and thickly blanketed the state with an acrid, unsightly and unhealthy smoke for nearly two weeks.

What changed to cause this dramatic increase in cata-



Guest Editorial: The Coming Firestorms

By Dr. Bob Zybach

strophic wildfire frequency and severity?

The problems began in the 1960s, with apparently well-intentioned national efforts to create large untouched wilderness areas and cleaner air and water on our public lands.

The single biggest turning point in how public forests are managed happened on December 22, 1969: about 50 lawyers in Washington, DC created the Environmental Law Institute, and a short distance away Congress simultaneously passed the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA).

Next, the 1973 Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the 1980 Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) provided the growing environmental law industry with a way to be paid by the government for challenging nearly every attempt to log or actively manage public forests.

By the 1980s, the artificial creation of Habitat Conservation Plans ("HCPs") and the listing of spotted owls as an Endangered Species laid

the groundwork for today's fires.

The 1994 Clinton Plan for Northwest Forests might have been the final nail in the coffin. The subsequent never-ending environmental lawsuits, new Wilderness areas and HCP creations, access road decommissionings, and fruitless public planning exercises have created tens of millions of acres of massive fuel build-ups and "let it burn" policies that have decimated our forests and wildlife.


A predicted result has been ever larger western Oregon forest fires. More than 90% of these large and catastrophic scale fires have taken place in federal forestlands, which represent almost 60% of all Oregon's forested areas.

Even if, like Facebook executives, you believe these fires were somehow sparked by climate change, you should be very concerned with what will happen next.

Lessons from the 1902-1929 Yacolt Fires, 1933-1951 "Six-Year Jinx" Tillamook Fires, and the 1987-2018 Kalmiopsis Wilderness Fires are clear: unless removed, the dead trees resulting from these fires will fuel even greater and more severe future fires.

The 2020 fire-killed trees should be strategically mapped, sold, and harvested ASAP, before they further deteriorate in value and increase in risk. Prices for Douglas fir logs are at record highs, and there is great current need for good-paying rural jobs and local building materials.

It will be interesting to see if we can learn from Oregon's fire history and take the prompt, decisive actions needed to avoid the clearly predictable coming firestorms.

Bob Zybach has been Program Manager for educational nonprofit www.ORWW.org since 1996. He is author of *The Great Fires: Indian Burning and Catastrophic Forest Fire Patterns of the Oregon Coast Range, 1491-1951*. 

Western Oregon's 2020 Labor Day Fires

By Bob Zybach, Ph.D

Oregon's 2020 Labor Day wildfires are the worst in the state's history, covering more than a million acres, destroying more than 4,100 homes, causing the emergency evacuations of more than 40,000 people, and killing millions of wild animals.

At least nine people died in these fires and most of western Oregon was blanketed with unhealthy, unsightly, acrid smoke for nearly two weeks. For much of that time this air pollution was considered the worst for the entire planet and the long-term health effects of these conditions are still being evaluated.

How did this happen, and how can we keep this type of event from happening again? Or is that even possible?

With a single exception, the 1966 Oxbow Fire, there were no major wildfires in western Oregon for 35 years, from 1952 until 1987. Since then, during the most recent 34 years, there have been nearly 30 such events, with three large-scale (10,000-plus acres) and five catastrophic-scale (100,000-plus acres) wildfires taking place this year alone. Two other fires, Echo Mountain and Almeda Drive, totaled more than 8,000 acres, destroyed 2,700 homes, and killed at least three people.

All 10 of these deadly fires were tied to atypical east winds that began on Labor Day, September 7, and continued intermittently through September 10. What changed between 1952 and



The upper photo was taken with an Osborne camera from the Kinney Ridge Lookout on June 4, 1937, a few miles west of Detroit, looking downstream along the North Fork Santiam River, toward the current location of Detroit Dam and Reservoir. The two lower photos were taken by Mattija Weeks, Asplundh Tree Services, while clearing right-of-way for the PGE powerlines near the mouth of Breitenbush River, a short distance upstream from Detroit. The picture on the left was taken on July 9, 2020, and the picture on the right was taken on October 12, 2020.

1987; and from 1987 to 2020? From one major fire in 35 years to nearly one major fire – or more – a year?

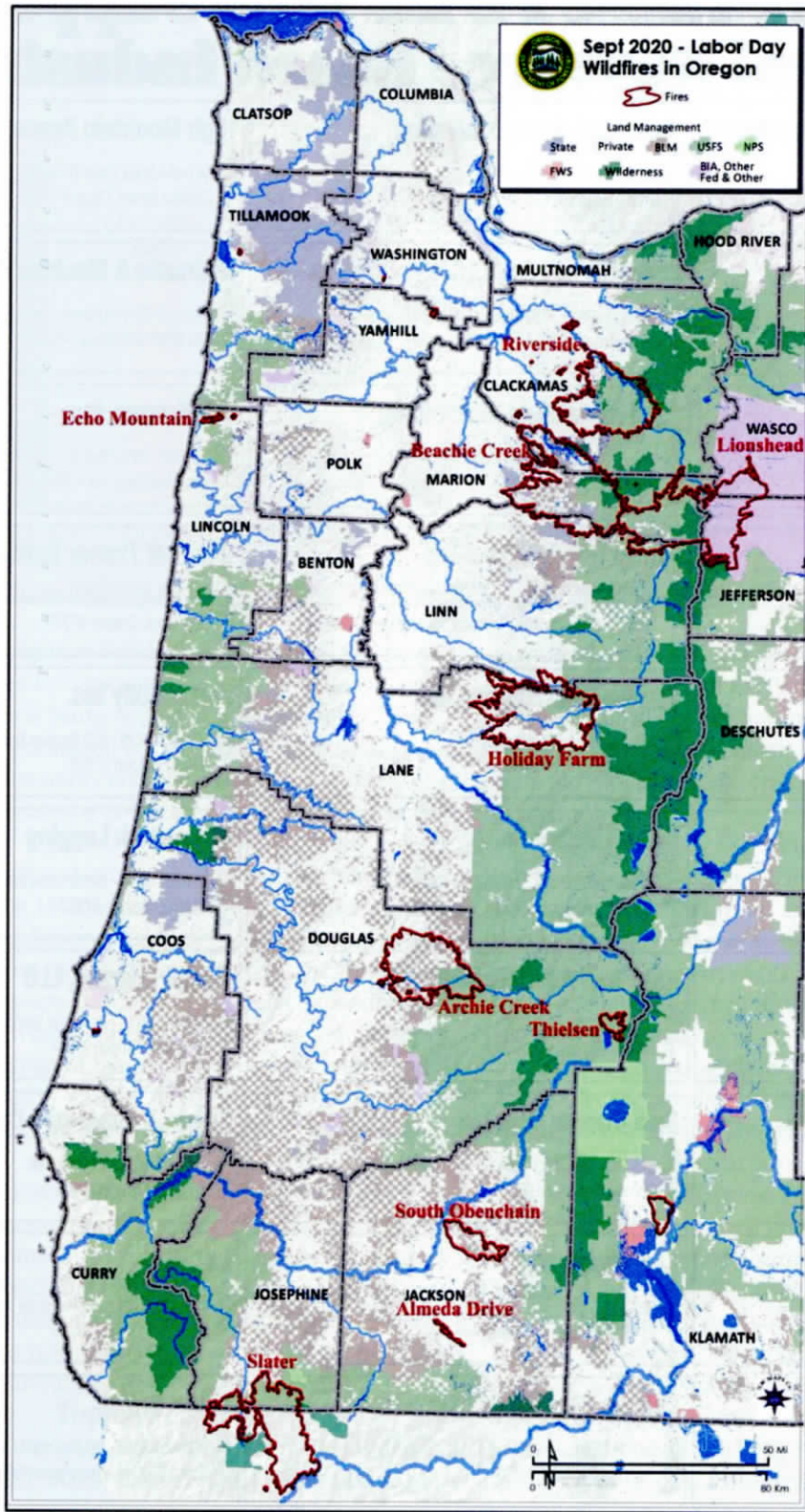
A wildfire needs four elements in order to occur: weather, topography, fuel, and a source of ignition.

Topography is mostly a constant; weather has been largely predictable on a seasonal basis for thousands of years; ignitions take place wherever people or lightning – or both – are present; and fuels are the factor that are most often moderated by human actions and decisions.

Sources of ignition.

In western Oregon most wildfires are started by people, followed by lightning, and then volcanoes. Lightning and volcanoes are not a factor on the Coast Range, leaving people as almost exclusive causes of fire in that region; lightning-caused wildfires are also common, along with human-caused fires, in the Klamath-Siskiyou and Cascades; and volcanic fires only take place in the Cascades – and then very infrequently. People and lightning are the most common causes of wildfire there, too.

What is of great interest is the timing, severity and widespread distribution of the Labor Day Fires: eight of the 10



Alameda Drive.
Jackson County. 5,700 acres, 2,400 homes, 3 deaths.

Archie Creek.
Douglas County. 131,500 acres, 138 homes, 1 death.

Beachie Creek/ Lionshead [Santiam].
Marion County. 300,700 acres, 629 homes, 5 deaths.

Echo Mountain.
Lincoln County. 2,600 acres, 293 homes.

Holiday Farm [McKenzie River].
Lane County. 173,000 acres, 517 homes, 1 death.

Riverside.
Clackamas County. 138,100 acres, 62 homes.

Slater.
Josephine County. 34,000 acres (Oregon); 700 homes, 2 deaths (California).

South Obenchain.
Jackson County. 32,700 acres, 33 homes.

Thielsen.
Douglas County. 10,000 acres.

GIS Mapping by Teresa Zena Alcock, Oregon Department of Forestry, November 18, 2020.

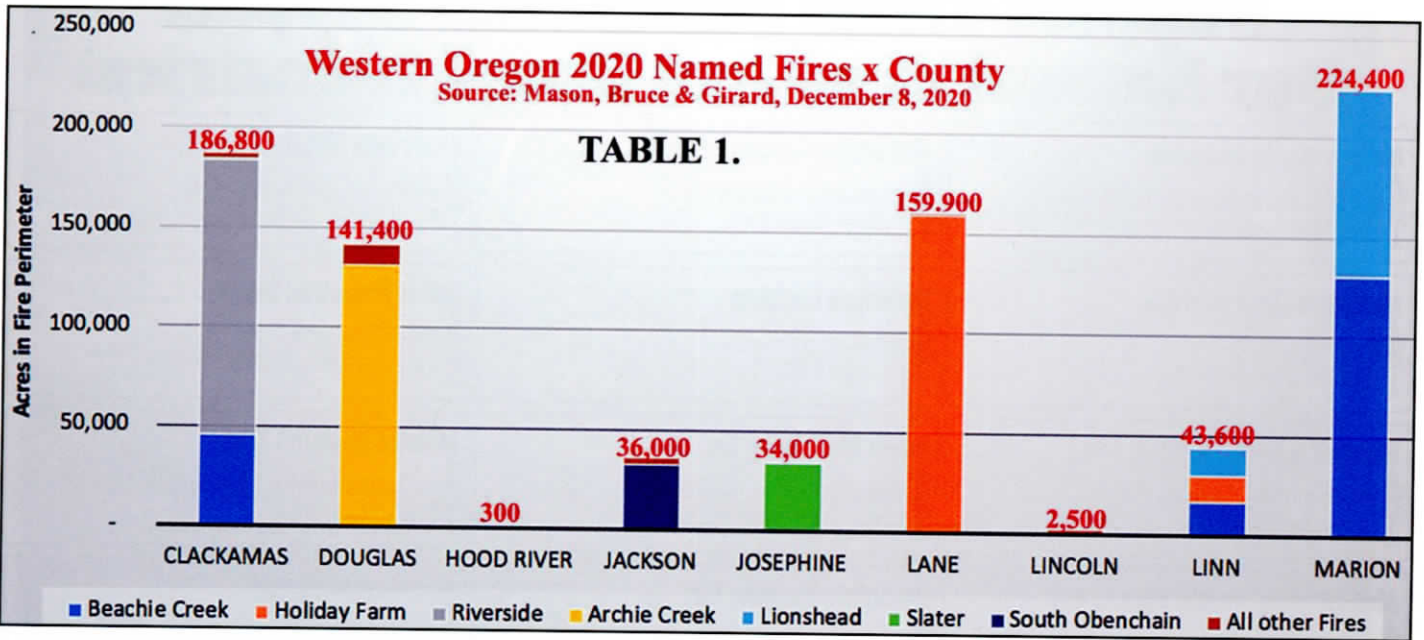
Statistical data courtesy of Mason, Bruce & Girard, December 8, 2020.

named fires shown on the map were reported during the evening of September 7 through the early morning of September 8. The Holiday Farm Fire was first reported at 7:30 PM on Labor Day, followed by Echo Mountain at 11:45 PM, Riverside at midnight, South Obenchain at 1:59 AM, Slater at 6:43 AM, Archie Creek at 7:37 AM, Thielsen at 8:30 AM, and then, at 11:00 AM, an arsonist started the Alameda Drive Fire.

Western Oregon 2020 Named Fires x County

Source: Mason, Bruce & Girard, December 8, 2020

TABLE 1.



Curiously, investigators listed all but the Almeda Drive event as being ignited by “unknown” causes; or remain “under investigation” as this is being written in mid-December. Not surprisingly, much speculation is that the fires were mostly started by deep-pocket utility companies, or – given the suspicious timing of the fires – by political arsonists sympathetic to the Portland rioters.

Two of the fires that also blew up during those hours actually started on August 16: the Lionshead Fire by lightning on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in the eastern Cascades, and the Beachie Creek Fire by an unknown cause in the Opal Creek Wilderness in the western Cascades. The strong September east winds quickly caused the Lionshead Fire to burn completely through the northern part of the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness and connect with the Beachie Creek Fire to destroy or greatly damage the Marion County towns of Idanha, Detroit, Gates, and Mill City.

One generally unrecognized factor in the great number and widespread causes of the Labor Day Fires may have been prolonged stay-at-home orders and related unemployment due to the coronavirus pandemic. These fires all started or blew up on the third day of a three-day weekend in which people were widely reported as recreating outdoors – many for the first time in months – on a beautiful day near the end of summer.

Topography.

Major wildfires rarely spread widely over flat lands due to a variety of reasons. One major reason is that these lands are most often occupied by people and livestock and available fuels are kept to a minimum by firewood gathering, plowing, irrigation, mowing, paving, and grazing.

Homes and other flammable structures are a separate consideration, and particularly if constructed from wood and built or placed in close proximity to one another. The Almeda Drive Fire that largely destroyed the towns of Phoenix and Talent this year would be one example, and the mobile home parks of Rainbow, Blue River, and Echo Mountain would be others.

Fires moving uphill are often the hottest and fastest mov-

ing, traveling on ambient air currents and heating and drying the fuels in advance of the flames – which are typically longer and hotter than those of fires moving downhill or across flat surfaces. However, the Labor Day Fires were driven downhill from the Cascades crest, driven by the unusual strength of the east winds.

Weather.

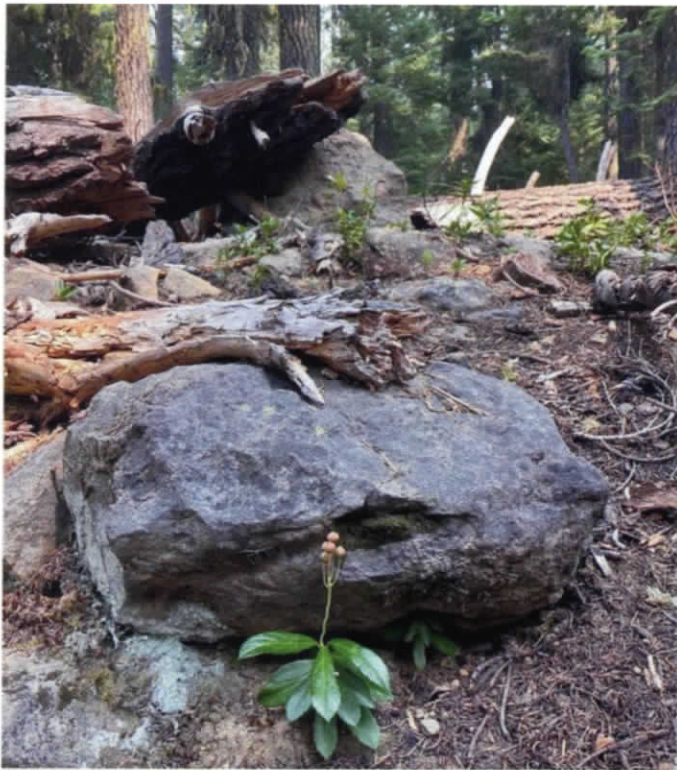
Catastrophic-scale wildfires in western Oregon all travel on an east wind. East winds are continental and dry out vegetation as they go; west winds come in from the Pacific Ocean and typically carry great amounts of moisture in the forms of rain, snow, and humidity. As a result, east winds tend to spread fires and west winds tend to suppress or extinguish them.

East winds taking place in the summer months of July, August, and September are the ones most associated with catastrophic wildfires. The winds of September 7, 8, and 9 were unusual in that persistent gusts often reached 50 or 60 miles-per-hour, causing the widespread fires to literally explode.

Prior to 2020, the best known example of this type of concordance of fire and a strong summer east wind was the Tillamook Fire of 1933 – which blew up at midnight August 24 with “gale force” east winds and burned more than 250,000 in the next two days, before being stopped by west winds, fog, and rain. A very big difference is that the Tillamook Fire was a single event, whereas the Labor Day Fires were taking place from the California border to the Columbia River.

According to meteorologist Chuck Weise, weather events similar to August, 24-25, 1933 and September 7-9, 2020 also occurred on September 15-17, 1965, September 14-17 and 25-27, 1970, and September 14-17, 1971 – yet none of these latter events are associated with large wildfires of any size or consequence.

If these events are “caused” by weather or somehow associated with “climate change,” as many have claimed, why were there no catastrophic wildfires in 1965, 1970, or 1971? Weather, topography, and widespread use of fire by people on a strong east wind were all the same, or very similar. The principal dif-



Top Left: Ground Fuels. Top Right: Ladder Fuels. Bottom: Crown Fuels. Photographs by McKenzie Peters, NW Maps Co., Mt. Thielsen Trail, August 23, 2020.

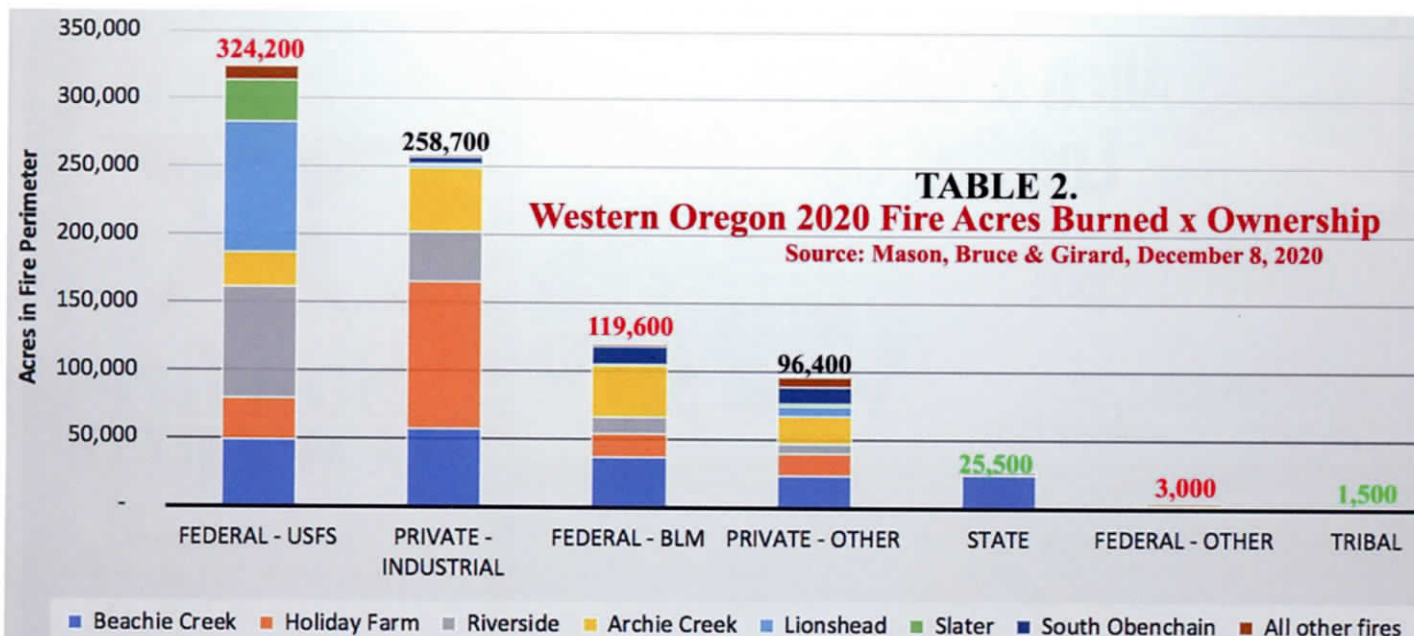
ference would seem to be fuels.

Fuels.

The catastrophic wildfires of the past 30 years have been generally and specifically predicted by me and others based al-

most entirely on fuel patterns, and particularly on those patterns that have been developing since the 1960s on federal lands.

Wildfire fuels and related events are closely related to ownership patterns. With few exceptions, almost all major wildfires



in western Oregon the past 70 years have taken place on federal lands, including designated Wilderness areas, National Forests, and BLM timberlands.

The Labor Day Fires in general, and the Holiday Farm Fire in particular, are something of an anomaly in this regard by being largely fueled by actively managed timberlands and small towns. Still, western Oregon lands that burned this summer included 445,000 acres of federal forestlands as compared to 335,000 acres of privately owned residences, family tree farms, and industrial forestlands.

The apparent reasons for this disparity, and for the predictability of these events, can be found in the series of federal regulations and environmental law determinations since the 1960s. By political decree and legal decisions, the post-WWII actively managed federal forests have been incrementally sidelined as passively managed wilderness, roadless areas, streamside buffers, and “critical habitat.”

These actions and decisions have resulted in massive forest fuel build-ups in these areas, and catastrophic wildfires have predictably followed. This has nothing to do with unusual weather conditions or a changing climate, and everything to do with unprecedented and unstable accumulations of flammable vegetation over millions of contiguous acres.

Three of the photos accompanying this article were taken along the southern perimeter of the Thielsen Fire about a month before it burned. They clearly illustrate the problems currently taking place on federal lands – the increasing accumulations of dangerous ground, ladder, and canopy fuels in our public forests:

Ground fires are much like grass or shrub fires, in that they often rejuvenate and protect the remaining stand of trees if regularly burned. This can be a beneficial process, and particularly when regularly completed under controlled circumstances. However, when ground fuels are allowed to build up over time they can burn so hot as to girdle and kill, or severely damage, adjacent trees

Ladder fuels are the lower limbs, intermediate-sized trees and shrubs, hanging mosses, and dead wood that carry the flames of a ground fire into the crown of a tree.

Canopy, or crown fires are the main cause of tree mortality during wildfires. In Douglas fir, a crown fire can readily kill 90% or more of a contiguous stand of trees. The resulting snags are of most concern to forest managers, or should be. They are ugly and dangerous, likely fuel for future fires if left to remain,

The Great Fires

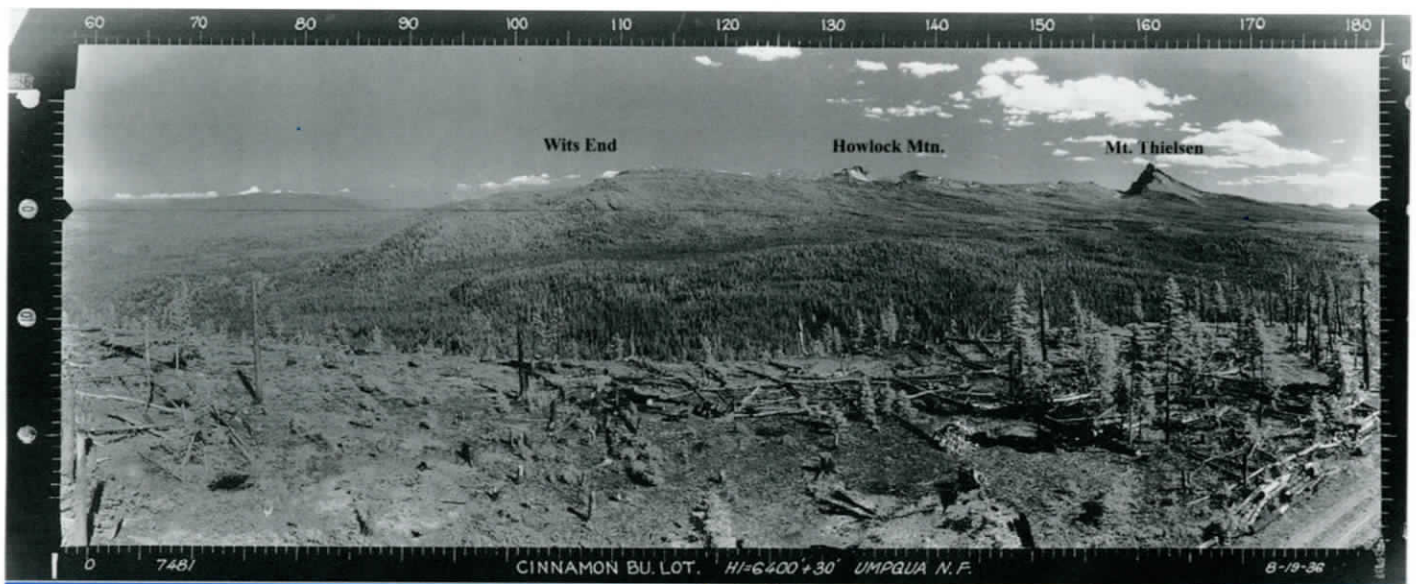


Indian Burning and Catastrophic Forest Fire Patterns of the Oregon Coast Range, 1491-1951

By Dr. Bob Zybach

Reprinting of Dr. Zybach's 2003 PhD dissertation. Includes: full text; 60 maps (47 color); 38 figures (17 color); 26 tables.

NW Maps Co. 364 pages. Hardcover \$85.00; PDF \$20.00.
http://nwmapsco.com/Books/Great_Fires/index.html



These photos of Mount Thielsen and Thielsen Creek subbasin were taken from the Cinnamon Butte Fire Lookout. The upper photo was made with an Osborne camera on August 9, 1937. The lower left photo was taken on August 3, 2020 by McKenzie Peters, NW Maps Co., and the lower right video-clip, also by Peters, was taken from the same general location on October 27, 2020. It is interesting to compare the forest patterns in 1937 with the 2020 Thielsen burn patterns; in particular, the distant linear burn pattern and the foreground trees and cuttings.

yet can often be profitably marketed if sold and salvaged within a short time of being killed.

What next?

These deadly and destructive events were predicted and could have largely been avoided if active management policies had remained in effect on our federal lands.

Fire-killed trees rapidly lose value through deterioration, and also due to glutting the market when massive numbers of logs are harvested at about the same time. There is a real need for rural jobs, reconstruction and repair funding, and structural building materials following the destruction and devastation of the Phoenix, Talent, Rainbow, Blue River, Vida, Gates, Mill City, and Otis communities.

Dead trees pose a real and proven danger to the communities just named, but also to the larger cities of Portland, Salem, Eugene, Roseburg, Medford, and Lincoln City to the immediate west of those towns. The primary danger is wild-fire and smoke driven by east winds, as historically shown by the multiple fires and reburns in Tillamook County from

1933 to 1951 and in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness from 1987 to 2018.

This urgency is not lost on private landowners – they have already started salvage logging operations. The problem is on state and federal lands, in which minor logging sales have been held up for years by legal actions initiated by environmental organizations and their legal staffs.

Following harvest of burned lands, the next steps include site preparation, reforestation, and stand maintenance of the rejuvenated forests and woodlands. Improved road and trail access, timely thinnings, and reintroduction of prescribed burning should be important aspects of these strategies.

The time has long passed in which state and federal rules and regulations regarding management of our public forests should be revisited and updated. These fires were largely fueled by Wilderness areas, neglected timberlands, artificial “critical habitat” designations, and overgrown “riparian zones.” It will be interesting to see what, if anything, happens as a result of this unnecessary destruction.

