

Commentary

Clearcutting and fire

We need to know more about the historical link between logging practices and catastrophic forest blazes

A front-page article in The Oregonian on July 24 notes that "a wildfire, on average, burns more acres today than it did in the past three decades."

In the same paper, a guest column by the owner of a helicopter logging business ("In My Opinion," by Michael Fahey) contends that wildfires are a result of the Forest Service not thinning our forests.

On the same day, on television, a professional environmentalist claimed that fires threatening California's sequoias were the result of misguided Forest Service fire suppression policies. And those not blaming the Forest Service seem to suspect global warming is the culprit.

Why is everyone ignoring the relationship between clearcutting history and forest fire history in Western Oregon and Washington?

Between 1849 and 1945 some of the

largest catastrophic fires in history occurred in the Douglas-fir region of these two states. The Yaquina, Nestucca, Forks, Yacolt, Coos and Tillamook fires burned hundreds of thousands of acres of forests in a matter of days and weeks. Fuel loads were up to 10 times greater per acre than the fires occurring in Arizona, Colorado or Eastern Oregon today.

After World War II the nation began a massive housing construction and paper production effort that resulted in extensive clearcutting operations in both states. Access roads were built, large-scale firebreaks were created and modern equipment and skilled woodsmen were deployed across the landscape. For the most part, cata-

strophic wildfires were eliminated or readily contained. Forest recreation and deer and elk populations boomed.

In the past 30 years, clearcutting has come under public disfavor, loggers have been put out of work, access roads have been "de-commissioned" and the wildfires have returned with a vengeance. Maybe this is just a coincidence, but it is one worth investigating.

Most people interested in forest issues understand the economic value of clearcutting. Wildfire-control values should be obvious to everyone, too.

Unfortunately, the biological and ecological values of clearcutting shade-intolerant species such as Douglas fir are understood by very few.



IN RESPONSE

Bob Zybach

We need to take the lessons of Mount St. Helens, the Tillamook fires and the Columbus Day Storm to heart and consider the common-sense benefits of reintroducing clearcutting as a viable management tool in our nation's forests. The alternatives are mostly bad news.



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ON THE WEB: Donald Fontenot of the Oregon chapter of the Sierra Club opposes clearcutting in the Tillamook Forest. Online at http://www.oregonlive.com/public_commentary/oregonian/.