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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Post-fire forest policies should focus on watershed health

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By Tim Palmer

A drumbeat of misinformation after the wildfires of 2017 calls for abandoning well-established safeguards for the forests, wildlife and watersheds of the West. One of my county commissioners blamed the Forest Service for “absolute devastations” and, chiming in, my state legislator called for “changes in forest policy ... across the Pacific Northwest.”

Statements such as these are a transparent pretext for heavy logging in the aftermath of the fires.

Specious arguments say that a lack of “management” (read “logging”) caused the fires to be so destructive. But logging does not inhibit fires; in fact, the hottest fires result on land that has been cut over and followed by thick plantations of young trees.

Judicious thinning of crowded second-growth following the clearcuts may well be in order, especially near urban areas, but mature forests burn less than others because the trees there are thick-barked, shadier and cooler, with less fire-laddering undergrowth and with long boles that have shed their fire-prone lower branches through the ages.

Fire behavior analysts have found that the current epidemic of conflagrations in the West is not principally a result of fuel factors, but rather of drought, hot temperatures and especially wind, which together now override attempts to affect fire behavior with forest management prescriptions of any kind, as reported by E.D. Reinhardt in the journal *Forest Ecology and Management*.

Perhaps most important in addressing today’s epidemic of misunderstandings: Salvage logging is not the harmless panacea that’s promoted by those who are paid to get out the cut.

Rather, the soils and watersheds of burned areas are more easily disturbed than those of unburned forests. If anything, logging should be more restricted in burned zones than outside of them.

Beyond these questions, watershed stewardship should be paramount in plotting any path forward for Oregon's forests. Healthy rivers and streams are our essential water supplies, the foundation of commercial fisheries, the prerequisite of sport fishing and the lifelines of recreation that now fuel 140,000 jobs in Oregon — five times that of the timber industry. And healthy rivers require that forests be treated well. When in doubt, protect watershed health. Otherwise all else will fail.

If the Forest Service recommends modest amounts of salvage logging — targeted for public safety along roads, and near developed zones, and outside riparian, roadless, and old growth forest reserves — it will be wisely treading the thin line between responsible land management versus the push to open vast areas of our public domain to the interests of those who benefit by logging without limits.

Post-fire forest management should not be determined solely by goals for immediate timber production, but for sustainable timber production, the quality of our drinking water, the economy of our fisheries, the stability of our soils, the abundance of wildlife to hunt and to view, and recreation for all and for the multi- million-dollar commerce it generates.

Our public land — even after fires — has far more value than just the logs that can be cut there.

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