

Making a difference in Oregon's forests

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This year's fires in Southern California have raised questions about whether Oregon forests face similar threats. While the ecological conditions are not identical, as an Oregonian with responsibility for managing forests east of the Cascades, I can report that eastern Oregon is already burning -- in both a literal and figurative sense. Literally, our forests are being transformed by wildfire and insects. While fire is natural, the large, severe fires we've seen over the last few years are neither necessary nor desirable. Figuratively, eastern Oregon is smoldering as it loses mills and forestry jobs. And a warming climate only will make matters worse.

But there are solutions to these problems that also present significant opportunities. It is possible to improve forest health, wildlife habitat and fire resiliency and to do so in ways that create jobs in eastern Oregon communities. The solution lies in sustainable forest management.

What is sustainable forest management? In eastern Oregon's federal forests, it means leaving the largest, most fire-resistant trees and sufficient replacement stock to perpetuate a diverse, resilient forest. Its goal is a forest that can sustain environmental, social and economic benefits for us now and for our grandchildren in the future.

The Nature Conservancy says that 21 million of the 34 million acres of Oregon's forest and woodlands need treatment to restore their health and habitat. Most scientists and foresters now agree that resiliency can be restored through selective but aggressive thinning of trees, followed by the appropriate use of prescribed fire. In fact, future eastside forests could include more and healthier old-growth trees if treated to reduce their vulnerability to droughts, insects and fires.

Thinning forests will not only restore their resiliency, but will also rebuild a supply of wood to local mills for production of one of the planet's most renewable and sustainable natural resources. From 1989 to 2000, 34 mills closed in eastern Oregon, and with them went 3,732 family-wage jobs. Thirteen mills remain.

It's not too late to turn this around, but time is of the essence. Mill closures not only affect opportunities for federal forests, they also remove markets for private timber. With nowhere to sell their logs, private forest landowners may be pressured to convert their lands to development or other nonforest purposes. That's an outcome nobody should want.

The fact is these two problems -- forest health and forest jobs -- go to the heart of rural Oregon's economic, community and environmental sustainability. For example, our Collins Lakeview Sawmill collaborated just this year with local, state and federal officials and conservation leaders to break ground on the Marubeni Sustainable Energy Co.'s renewable energy facility that uses thinnings (woody biomass) from overstocked forests. We also just dedicated a new small-log sawmill to use more of this material.

So for those Oregonians asking whether we can avoid the fires like those that swept this year through Southern California -- or for that matter here in Oregon over the past several years -- there is a growing consensus that we have both the ability and know-how to make a difference in our forests and in our communities.

And we should get on with it.

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