

# Committee on Resources

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Regarding the  
Restoration of Forests After Catastrophic Fire

Submitted to the  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
House Committee on Resources

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Thank you for this opportunity to offer my perspective.

I am a City Councilor in Ashland, Oregon, a town of 20,000 in southwestern Oregon. Our residents are actively involved in caring for our municipal watershed. We began thinning small trees on City land in our municipal watershed in 1995. We developed an Interface Management Plan for private lands and we partner with the US Forest Service in the stewardship of federal lands. We are a Healthy Forest Restoration Act project and are currently updating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. We have had fires "just over the ridge" the past two summers.

I also coordinate the Collaborative Learning Circle, a ten-year old regional network of community-based organizations in southern Oregon, northern California. Our member organizations responded to declining conditions in their communities and forests by creating training programs and jobs doing watershed restoration, hardwood and small diameter utilization, monitoring, and non-timber forest products.

My testimony addresses issues related to fire, as opposed to other catastrophic events; it is the disturbance I am most familiar with.

In the last ten years, our region has experienced a major social, economic and political transition. The demographics and industries have changed; the recreational value of the land is causing people to look differently at wild places. Much less of our economy is dedicated to extraction. Most mills closed or retooled for smaller trees.

Congress both stimulated and invested in this transition. Through the Northwest Forest Plan and the 1.2 billion dollars associated with the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative, a long-term commitment to fund the National Fire Plan, and the initial efforts to support the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, Congress has demonstrated its interest in a framework built on broad policy goals and common ground. These programs responded to the need to transcend the "boom to bust" cycles that communities faced and create continuity in management that's based on trust and good science.

Over the last ten years, our region adjusted to new policies, weathered controversies, cooperated with former adversaries on projects, lobbied for and implemented cost-share programs to leverage the public investment on private lands, and created businesses and training to implement new forestry practices. We painstakingly built delicate social agreements to move from conflict to collaboration.

Of course, there are issues that will not be resolved, despite the best intentions. Hopefully we will find compromises that move us forward, but the differences in the core values behind the debate change slowly, if at all. Part of our challenge as decision makers is to cleave out new decision space that involves integrative decision making. We have an opportunity for innovation that moves beyond supporting one

interest group over another, instead exploring genuine work towards multi-stakeholder-supported and integrative decision making.

I believe that the questions you are exploring today relative to restoration practices on damaged forests fall into this “irresolvable” category. In my region, and I suspect the country, there is not agreement on whether there’s an ecological imperative for post-fire restoration, or what “restoration” means or looks like on the landscape. There is broad public support for post-fire restoration. In fact, the National Fire Plan and the 10-Year Implementation Plan for the Western Governors Association’s Comprehensive Strategy identify “restoring fire-adapted ecosystems” as one of four major goals. Questions about post-fire restoration revolve around what it should look like and how it should be done, but there is broad support for goals such as ensuring soils stability, minimizing impacts on watersheds, minimizing the impacts of invasive species. These goals focus on restoring the health of the land, or the functioning of these forest ecosystems.

After a wildfire, managers and legislators are pressured to act fast for a number of reasons. Using the trees to fill industry’s resource need and spending the revenue to offset the cost of restoration has some logic.

Salvage logging is not the same as restoration, although logging might be part of some restoration strategies. Salvage logging, however, focuses on capturing the economic value of trees damaged in a wildfire, generally for social and economic purposes, such as providing jobs and timber supply for local mills, and possibly providing revenues to the federal agencies. As a tool for post-fire restoration, salvage logging is controversial for a variety of reasons. People in various fields of science disagree over the range of impacts of post-fire logging, including possible adverse environmental impacts due to the logging activity and increased fuel loads from post-logging slash. There are fundamental differences in how we define the value of a stand of burned trees, and about the appropriate function of a roadless area. Those differences directly affect what we think should happen after a fire and how fast it should happen.

In the mid-90s, when representatives from rural communities were committed to working in the forest in the face of scientific uncertainty and social distrust, they heeded the advice to “start small, go slow” and to ensure learning and corrective action. You are looking today at examples of wildfires and how people responded to them, but, of course there are other examples that proceeded quite differently; we are touching the proverbial elephant.

In our search for identifying best practices and building common ground, I offer the following suggestions:

Start at a scale that most stakeholders find acceptable or on the edge of comfort, and build experiences of success.

The increased frequency of fires and the convergence of multiple fires into large acreages, as happened in the Biscuit creates opportunities for potentially large revenue streams and projects. Unfortunately, in my region, people question the agencies’ ability to complete non-commercial post-fire restoration as effectively as they complete salvage logging. One way for land managers to rebuild the necessary support for restoration after disturbance events is through projects that are at a scale that people feel comfortable with, can monitor and consider successful.

A good example from my region is the Forest Service’s first “Proposed Action” for the Biscuit Fire area that came within ten months of the fire. It suggested logging 55,518 mbf from 4,029 acres without entering Inventoried Roadless Area or Late Successional Reserves (Table ES-1; FEIS). That modest post-fire salvage sale, had it complied with the environmental laws would have provoked far less legal and social conflict and could have been done with a more appropriate allocation of agency resources. The timber sales conducted under Categorical Exclusions on the Biscuit Fire this year removed Hazard Trees and fire line trees; they were monitored by environmentalists, but not challenged, despite alleged violations.

Had county and timber industry representatives not intervened with Dr. Sessions’ study and the Administration redirected the project, it would have served as an important opportunity to realize revenue quickly, conduct limited rehabilitation, and allow the area to restore itself.

Maintain existing NEPA requirements for public participation and analysis of post-fire projects.

Projects developed under existing regulations and properly administered are cheaper and more effective than those proposed under regulations designed to truncate scientific analysis. Often delays and increased costs are blamed on “excessive” regulations and “analysis paralysis.” In fact, delays and increased costs

often result from agency project proposals that are not scientifically defensible. If projects are defensible based on their science, they are also likely to be more easily arbitrated on their values.

Ignoring or out-maneuvering opponents doesn't eliminate the issues; it fuels social conflict. In the case of the Biscuit Fire project, local newspaper headlines are already reinforcing this conflict. The kind of conflict that can be sustained in a big city like Washington DC, tears at the fabric in communities like Ashland and Cave Junction.

The Administration has made recent, significant changes to rules affecting the public's right to participate in management activities. We need time to try the additional categorical exclusions, emergency exemptions, and modified access to the courts without having those changes coupled with overly large projects that stimulate concerns about forest and watershed degradation. Fire brings its own set of changes and stresses; it is vital that your decisions and that of the Administration empower citizens to work out problems on the ground together.

Develop restoration goals through plans developed at the local level.

The best way to develop broadly supported restoration goals is through collaborative processes at the local level where there is opportunity for all stakeholders to be involved. Authorities for "community wildfire protection plans" in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act establish a local planning process through which communities have a strong voice in prioritizing where on the forest landscape fuel-reduction projects should be done and the methods of treatment. Generally, I believe, these authorities were intended for pre-wildfire treatments, to reduce fuel loads and protect communities and watersheds from wildfire risk. However, questions regarding post-fire restoration goals should also be dealt with through an open, community-based planning process, such as that envisioned for community wildfire protection plans.

Direct agencies to maintain a firm check and balance on ecological protection where economic- and time-driven post-fire salvage logging is implemented.

Prescriptions for active restoration should be clearly related to the factors that limit ecosystem recovery and integrity. Under the NW Forest Plan, not all land is managed for its commercial value; the agricultural model of salvage logging immediately after fire, suppressing competitive vegetation with herbicides, and replanting is not appropriate on all Federal forest areas.

Create mechanisms that ensure that the non-commercial restoration work is completed at the same level of performance and timeframe as commercial restoration work.

While there may be few practices that can be applied to all post-fire forest restoration, the scientific literature appears to be consistent on the point that slash from logging or post-fire logging intensifies the impacts of fire in those areas and must be promptly removed from the system. A December 8, 2003 Los Angeles Times article "Dead Trees Fail to Bring Life to Forest," highlights problems that federal agencies face in our region obtaining sufficient bids on post-fire salvage sales and in producing revenues that ensure that slash left from logging is treated, and that other non-commercial restoration goals are met.

The Congress and Federal land managers promised pre-commercial thinning that was not delivered after high-grade logging in the 1970-1980s. The agencies must earn back the public's trust that it will complete non-commercial work after the big trees are removed.

Create incentives for post-fire restoration work that is accessible to people in nearby towns, while avoiding the creation of a new, fire-dependent industry

Community-based and non-profit organizations engaged in forestry and restoration work try to create or package natural resource-based jobs for rural people that are year-round and closer to home. Projects that support long-term capital investment, provide family wage jobs, and produce resource flows for value-added markets allow residents in rural towns to remain there. David Schott, the new Executive Director of Southern Oregon Timber Industries Association, stated that industry will not hire new workers to harvest the Biscuit volume, but will redirect existing employees from other volume while Biscuit is being cut.

In December of 2003, the LA Times reported that in 2002, salvage harvests made up nearly half the timber volume cut in California's 18 national forests. It is logical to examine the potential for salvage logging to pay for post-fire restoration in certain situations, however attempts to realign the agencies' administrative and

legal systems to rely on and expedite fire-dependent timber production off national forests falls short of the goals that community groups hold in the following ways:

- It fails to produce a predictable resource flow, reflecting more the boom-bust industry model, especially for smaller, less mobile companies;
- It can create unintended ecological consequences;
- It will fuel social conflict because the ecological stakes are perceived to be higher when the forest is in a recovery mode.

Fund and support multi-party monitoring of post-fire restoration

Multi-party monitoring processes that include multiple stakeholders in the design, implementation and analysis of feedback provide venues for the questions and disagreements to be articulated and addressed. It assures that diverse perspectives are brought into potentially contentious processes, and in so doing can reduce conflict by reducing appeals and increasing trust building. Multi-party monitoring is a key tool for shared learning among stakeholders and with the agencies. However, it remains under-funded and under-prioritized.

Ensure that post-fire salvage logging is assessed on the basis of both the cost and return to the government and that it's purposes are clear—as part of a restoration strategy.

The economics of post-fire salvage logging can be complex and tenuous. Economic returns are most often referenced to whether or not the timber purchaser can cover its costs and realize a profit margin; the cost and return to the government should be considered, as well. Economic motivations are heavily favored in salvage logging, so the public expects that they will be considered across the board. The availability of thorough economic information that internalizes typically externalized costs helps to address concerns about insufficient revenue for non-commercial work and allows people to track investments in restoration.

Act carefully relative to post-fire restoration so as not to disrupt the social and financial momentum behind fire hazard reduction and prevention efforts.

When community organizers started working over a decade ago on value-added strategies for the by-products of watershed restoration, few expected to do more than reduce the cost of treatment with the small trees, hardwoods, etc. We knew that the job required the kind of reinvestment we're most familiar with in urban renewal projects and that the National Fire Plan is making. We did not expect that post-fire restoration would be paid for by salvage logging and feared that if too much emphasis were placed on this strategy, the restoration goals might be compromised by unanticipated or "perverse" economic incentives.

It is problematic, therefore, that the Forest Service's Rehabilitation and Restoration program, the primary program through which the agency pursues the National Fire Plan's major goal of post-fire restoration, has been funded at such a low level over the past three years. Congress provided \$142 million for this program in FY 2001, the first year of strong funding for the National Fire Plan. Since then, funding has dropped dramatically. The Administration proposed to eliminate funding for this program in FY 2004 and has requested only \$3 million in FY 2005. Our question is if the Administration is not requesting funds from Congress for this key program, how does it expect to pay for post-fire restoration. We do not think its primary strategy should be to pay for restoration with revenues from salvage sales.

Similar questions were asked by stakeholder groups about the initiatives to reduce hazardous fuels. The compromises made in the process of adopting the President's Healthy Forest Restoration Act offer a clear indication of public sentiment towards work on public lands; they mark some common ground.

- Focus strong emphasis on doing projects around communities;
- Focus on treatments that involved "thinning from below" i.e. attention to smaller trees;
- Protect old growth forests;
- Participate in local collaboration to ensure public involvement and build public trust; and
- Ensure sufficient federal investment to do the projects without relying on revenue from timber sales.

Certainly, the highest level of agreement that we have is around reducing the risk of wildfire. Investments in the Forest Service's State and Private Economic Action Programs contributed critical support for raising communities' capacity to plan, fund, and coordinate fuels reduction. The implementation of the National Fire Plan primed the pump for on-the-ground results and vital interagency partnerships, leveraged investments by private landowners, and created jobs. Since early treatment of fire risk is the most cost effective approach to our situation, people are counting on the longevity of the National Fire Plan. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act holds the potential to build on this work if the resources authorized are allocated.

## Summary

Restoration of intensely burned forests involves far more ecologically and operationally sensitive components than implementing management strategies that focus on decreasing the likelihood of fire. Our restoration tools and options for intensely burned forestlands pale almost into insignificance compared with those available to us with intact forest ecosystems.

There is an impressive level of activity in watersheds across the West. It's happening on the slopes, in streams, and in meeting rooms. It's making a difference on the landscape and in our communities. The social capital that it takes to do this is an expense that doesn't appear in budget line items, but it nonetheless requires investment on your part. We are partners in this endeavor.