

## **Forest Management and Fire**

The assertion is correct that debate has been ignited concerning how we should manage forests. Many statements in the article, attributed to members of the OSU Forestry Department, either are in error or are made in a form that misleads the reader concerning the nature of forests. For example, past forest and fire management policies are blamed for the scope of the fires that took place this year. The implication is that policies of the distant and not the recent past are the culprit. The Biscuit fire is the "poster child" for demonstrating that the policies of the recent past that have created the problem. Consider first the fire history of the Siskiyou National Forest. From its founding until the late 1940's about 35,000 acres of the Siskiyou forest were burned each year. Until that time, there was almost no logging and very few roads existed in the Siskiyou National Forest. The need for forest products during the economic recovery after WWII and the technological advances, developed during WWII, made it possible to construct roads and harvest timber in steep country. The policy of making aggressive initial attack on forest fires in the shortest possible time was supported by placing a Smokejumper base at Cave Junction in 1943. The result of these past management policies was that the average acreage burned dropped to around 850 acres per year. A shift in forest management policies has been made in the past 20 years. The shift is from active management of forests as a national resource to conservation of the forests for an elite few. The change of policy has led to the destruction of the Siskiyou forest at the earlier levels of around 35,000 acres per year.

The Kalmiopsis wilderness achieved wilderness status in the mid 1960's. Little logging, beyond supporting the needs of early miners, and almost no road building has ever taken place in the Kalmiopsis wilderness. In 1987, the Silver fire burned 110,000 acres in and around the wilderness. The Silver fire was started by lightning. The size of the Silver fire was directly related to a delayed initial response. The Florence component of the Biscuit fire started in an area that was heavily burned by the Silver fire. The Biscuit #1, Biscuit #2 and Sourdough fires started in areas that are nearly inaccessible. Part of the inaccessibility to emergency personnel was due to the destruction of the one road into the area under the Roadless Area Rules. There was over a four-day delay before serious attempts to fight these fires began.

A Chronology of the Biscuit Fire has been published by the Siskiyou and Six Rivers National Forests. Careful study of the Chronology reveals that several mismanagement factors are responsible for the Biscuit #1, Biscuit #2, Sourdough and Florence fires becoming the disaster called the Biscuit fire. These factors can be laid directly at the feet of the people that have espoused the conservation approach to forest management. This includes the environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society and the Forest Guardians; the present managers within the various government agencies that manage the forests; and last, the people that have taught the philosophy of conservation management. Consider the following facts:

1. An attitude exists that fires should be allowed to burn unless they directly threaten individual citizen interests.
2. Permission had to be sought to use even the most important mechanized tool of fire control - the chain saw.
3. Equipment and personnel could not get to the fire areas because roads had been destroyed under the Roadless Area Rules.
4. Excessive safety and work rules kept personnel from attacking fires at the times that an attack might succeed.
5. When action in minutes counted, days were spent in discussion.

The mature Ponderosa pine forest is often touted as the ideal for forest management. In fact, there may be a primal instinct in humans that makes us wish to avoid a dense forest. However, given a few years of abundant rainfall even a Ponderosa pine forest quickly becomes overgrown. Only 13% of the area of western forests is covered by Ponderosa pine. We are faced with a dilemma when we try to manage a Ponderosa pine forest by conservation rules. The much loved mature trees are slowly dying because of insects, disease and age. If we remove all of the young trees then there will be no forest when the mature trees are gone. Even if we selectively thin the young trees then in the next cyclic spell of above average rainfall a severe regrowth of reproduction will occur. The Cerro Grande fire that burned Los Alamos, NM in May 2000 was started by a misguided attempt to thin a Ponderosa Pine forest. That forest was overgrown as the results of a ten-year period of above average rainfall. Because a Conservationist

organization, the National Park Service, refused to admit that they had made a mistake, more than 400 families were burned out of their homes. The Forest Guardian organization blocked any attempts to remove the dead but useable timber after the fire. Now an infestation of bark beetles is killing several times as much forest than had been killed by the Cerro Grande fire.

The Pinion - Juniper (PJ) forests are dismissed out of hand in the article. However, nearly 22% of the western forests are PJ. While these forests do not have a major economic usage, they are important. Storm King Mountain was covered with a PJ / Gambels Oak forest. The Smokejumpers and Prineville Hot Shots killed on Storm King Mountain were blamed in their own deaths for having a "can do" attitude. The truth is that the initial attack on Storm King Mountain was delayed for three days, in part, because of the conservation attitude "let it burn."

The statement is made that only 40% of the Biscuit fire was intense enough to kill the trees. When the timber kill of the Silver fire is added to this total, the loss is devastating. More than 350 square miles of forest have been destroyed. The loss of soils in the Biscuit fire area is dismissed as unimportant while a few years ago this was being cited as a reason to discontinue logging. In reality the area of the Biscuit fire is steep and the soil is sparse. The loss of those soils will be felt for many, many years. The destruction of the fisheries is dismissed with the excuse that silt is needed for better fisheries. No matter that with a few years of normal rainfall most of this silt will be in the Pacific ocean. There has been almost no discussion of the continuing loss of forest in the Biscuit fire areas that will result from the sudden explosion of bark beetles and other insects. The insects are taking advantage of both the standing dead trees and will begin taking advantage of the trees whose health has been impaired because of the fire.

The lack of an adequate initial response to the fires in the Kalmiopsis wilderness has resulted in a terrible loss to the people of this nation. The response to these fires was driven, largely, by the notions behind Conservation management of forests. Unless these management practices are abandoned, the people will lose far more of their resources in the coming years.

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