

Public Lands Foundation

Position Statement: PS 25-05

Restoration and Recovery of Federal Forests after Catastrophic Wildfires

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Federal land management agencies have a major responsibility in ensuring the recovery and reforestation of the forest after a catastrophic event such as a wildfire. The agencies should treat these activities as an emergency situation and aggressively pursue all restoration actions necessary to help promote the healing and restoration of the lands to desired conditions as prescribed in land use plans. Forest management activities should include prescriptions for (1) salvage that will capture economic values; (2) the planting of tree seedlings; and (3) a vegetative control and maintenance program to reduce the risk of recurring large scale fires and shrub encroachment. All these activities need to be initiated as quickly as possible after a wildfire.

ISSUE:

The Federal Agencies' role and responsibility for recovery of a conifer forest after a devastating wildfire or other catastrophic event is being questioned. Should dead trees be salvaged, burned areas be reforested and fuels treated, or should the area be left alone to recover by natural processes? Do we let natural processes deliver whatever vegetation and habitats that follow after a wildfire or do we hasten the return of forests to preferred ecological conditions through management and man's intervention?

BACKGROUND:

A significant debate is occurring about how the responsible land management Agencies (Forest Service, BLM) and concerned regulatory Agencies (FWS, NOAA, EPA, etc.) are reacting to the aftermath of a wildfire or other catastrophic event. Concerns are being raised about the Agencies lack of a timely response to reforestation and recovery of a forest. Questions are being asked about restoration goals, methods and approaches utilized for recovery, and what is considered to be valid or good science for restoration of the forest. Unfortunately, this debate has led the Federal Agencies to take a very precautionary view to any form of active recovery management in the forest. Instead, unnecessary delays and inaction have become the norm and routine for those lands that have significant ecological disturbances resulting from a devastating event. The Biscuit Fire is a prime example. The Agencies have taken a very passive "hands off" approach to reforestation and recovery of burned over lands within the perimeters of the Biscuit Fire. This approach is simply not appropriate for ensuring the presence and vitality of forestlands in the future.

THE BISCUIT FIRE:

The Biscuit Fire in southwestern Oregon occurred during 2002 and burned

approximately 500,000 acres of Federal forest. (467,000 acres on the Siskiyou National Forest and 9,028 acres on BLM). These lands are being managed under the umbrella of the Northwest Forest Plan. Four major land use categories were designated in the land use plan for the Biscuit fire burned over lands. These are congressionally designated lands (the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area); Administratively withdrawn lands; Late Successional Reserves (LSRs); and Matrix Lands. LSRs and Matrix lands are to be managed for forest values ranging from developing and maintaining a forest for old growth characteristics to lands devoted primarily for timber production. The forest ecosystem that existed on these lands prior to the fire is gone. The intense fire for the most part burned everything within its path and left a landscape of dead or dying trees and sterile soil. The environmental quality and economic value associated with these forestlands was severely jeopardized. Significant adverse impacts to soils, water quality, and endangered species dependent on old growth habitat have occurred because of this stand replacement fire. For example, an estimated 75,000 to 80,000 acres of spotted owl nesting habitat was rendered unsuitable by the fire (Forest Service 2003). The Biscuit Fire did not change or modify the land use allocations in the Northwest Forest Plan. The management goals, objectives, standards and guidelines for these forestlands are still the same and have not changed as a result of the fire.

After the fire, the federal agencies, both the Forest Service that manages the National Forests and the BLM which manages the O&C lands, did not aggressively pursue the development of recovery plans to help the lands heal and be restored to a desired condition as prescribed in the land use plan. The agencies did not treat reforestation as an emergency situation. For example, they did not immediately initiate active management programs to reestablish a forest with old growth characteristics in the LSRs and a Matrix forest environment that is suitable for commercial forest production. Instead it took the Forest Service, as lead agency, almost two years to issue a FEIS and publish their records of decisions. (Because the Forest Service had the overall responsibility for the fire, the BLM could not issue their decision until afterwards) Both agencies selected an alternative that employs active management on only a small portion of the burned area. For example, 4 percent of Forest Service lands are proposed for salvage and only 7 percent of the burned over lands are proposed for planting. For BLM, only 2 percent of the public lands were allocated for salvaging and only a small amount of the 9000 acres would be replanted with conifers. All the remaining lands (the vast majority of the Biscuit Fire area) would be left to recover naturally.

Two major issues are at the center of either taking an active (man's intervention) approach or leaving it alone and allowing nature to take its course over time. Salvaging of timber is the most controversial issue. Should dead trees be harvested or not? This really is not a resource or environmental question. All timber harvesting (salvaging) would be done in a way that would not detract from long-term recovery, desired future condition, and resource values of the Biscuit fire area. The question really centers on social and economic values. There are advocates for no salvaging regardless of how sensitive the Agencies are in developing and implementing harvest plans that are designed to protect the environment. These advocates are for no timber harvest regardless of the circumstance and have taken a position that all forests should be natural areas or designated as wilderness. Carefully done salvage, on the other hand, would reduce future fuel loads and help hasten the re-growth and recovery of the forest. Salvaging would also provide many economic opportunities.

If salvage harvest of dead trees was immediately conducted after the fire, many jobs would have been created and millions of dollars of income and revenues would have been generated to help support restoration efforts. Delays in taking any action for almost two years caused many of the trees to further deteriorate and decay, rendering the value of wood to become uneconomical for salvaging.

The second issue involves tree planting and subsequent stand maintenance. Should burned areas previously occupied by conifer species be planted and then maintained to insure survival or should these areas be left alone to recover at a rate dictated by slowly encroaching natural regeneration and conversion to hardwood and brush species? This issue is also centered around social values and it is not a resource or environmental issue. It is, however, about man's intervention in resource management. As with the salvaging issue there are those who advocate no active management and prefer a passive role to letting natural processes occur regardless of future results and recovery. On the other hand, many years of research and applied experiences on reforestation in SW Oregon have demonstrated that it is highly likely that natural regeneration of conifer species in severely burned areas will not occur for decades or possibly a century or more. In order to meet future desired conditions as prescribed in land use plans, planting will recover areas of large conifer trees more quickly. Reforested areas will also need to be maintained. Young conifers will not survive because of competing vegetation if not properly maintained.

The passive management approach to reforestation that was selected by the Federal Agencies is simply not appropriate for the burned lands within the Biscuit Fire. The tradeoffs of allowing natural recovery versus a variety of management interventions in a fire prone forest ecosystem are huge and will cause major setbacks to successfully achieving the goals and objectives of the Northwest Forest Plan. In addition, adverse impacts to soils, vegetation, water, and old growth species will continue long into the future as nature makes its successional adjustments. Without man's intervention and an active approach to management, it may take centuries to achieve the desired results in the land use plan.

PLF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE:

The Public Lands Foundation recommends that responsible Federal land management and regulatory agencies treat resource recovery after a catastrophic event as an emergency situation. Significant restoration actions should immediately take place to help healing and restoring the lands. When an emergency situation exists, such as resulting from the Biscuit Fire, excessive analysis and reviews that result in decision-making paralysis by the Federal Agencies must be eliminated. Immediate steps should be taken to streamline agency processes and procedures to ensure that aggressive management actions occur in the future in a timely manner. For example after a deadly wildfire, the concerned agencies within 30 days should develop and begin implementing a variety of forest management schemes that will allow the forest to grow back to its desired state in an effective manner. This management activity should include prescriptions for (1) salvage that will capture economic values; (2) an aggressive reforestation program; and (3) a vegetative control and maintenance program to reduce the risk of recurring large scale fires and shrub encroachment needs to be initiated as quickly as possible after the fire.

