

Transforming our Relationships with Forest and Fire—Scaling Up from Ashland Watershed to the Rogue Basin

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To confront changing climate, wildfire risks, and smoke, collaboratives are leading an ambitious effort to restore resilience to the dry forests and nearby communities of the Rogue River Basin of southern Oregon. By engaging community on deeply held values, broadening partnerships, and developing a science-based risk assessment and strategy, collaboratives are assisting community and commerce in retooling their cultural relationship with the forest landscape. These efforts have centered on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rogue River—Siskiyou National Forest (RRS) and the U.S. Department of Interior Medford District Bureau of Land Management (MBLM) and are extending to provide an all-lands approach to address the shared risks across public and private ownership.

Wildfire is intrinsic to North American forests, yet fire impacts are increasing due to climate change acting on homogenized landscapes of overly dense forests with altered forest composition formed by a century of fire exclusion and extractive logging. Rogue Basin forests bridge diverse ecosystems under a Mediterranean climate, resulting in productive dry, mixed-conifer forests featuring diverse native hardwoods and shrubs. Consistent with dry forests of nearby regions, eight-year fire-return intervals historically prevailed, with fires common in the spring and fall—in addition to summer. The pattern began fading in the 1850s with Euro-American settlement and the



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Kerry Metlen points out elements of ecological thinning for the Ashland Forest Resiliency implementation review team.

forced removal of native Americans who had thrived with extensive fire use.

In the contemporary checkerboard of public and private lands with sprawling communities at risk, fires increasingly threaten natural habitats and human communities—despite aggressive fire suppression. Arising with the alarm over regional smoke and fire impacts, a ground-swell of support has grown for proactive, ecological thinning and controlled burning. Consecutive summers with multiple fires and long periods of unhealthy air threaten long-term human health, summer tourism-based business, the real-estate market, and the broader economy, amplifying ongoing dialogue and the urgency to act.

The conceptual framing for collaborative restorative forestry work in the Rogue Basin is based in forest and fire science and an approach guided by the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, a national vision for wildland fire management. Promoting a view of shared risk management among all stakeholders and across all landscapes, the strategy articulates the need for meaningful progress toward three goals: 1) resilient landscapes; 2) fire-adapted communities; and 3) safe and effective wildfire response.

As landscape-scale collaborative

projects have developed in the Rogue Basin, experience, learning, scope, and partnership depth have increased (Table 1).

The Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project (AFR) focused on the City of Ashland's at-risk municipal watershed located on the RRS. The USDI Secretarial Applegate Pilot on the MBLM demonstrated ecological forestry concepts developed by professors Jerry Franklin and Norm Johnson of the University of Washington and Oregon State University, respectively, and with community engagement led by the Applegate Partnership and the budding Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative (SOFRC), a non-profit with a board of directors and collaborative participants.

Meanwhile, the Ashland project expanded to an all-lands framing in the Ashland Forest All-lands Restoration Initiative (AFARI) with support of the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Program to complete work on the federal AFR footprint, and thousands of private non-industrial lands funded through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and significant co-investments from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

Sophisticated community engagement is a hallmark of these collaborative projects. In Ashland, the ongoing

AFARI reflects the City of Ashland's deep historical engagement in watershed protection. When the RRS plans for watershed thinning of commercial sized trees in the 1990s met with protests, the city involved the community and concerned stakeholders in considering restorative commercial thinning on its municipal lands in the watershed—and successfully completed the project, building public trust in active, restorative management. By 2005 the RRS, using a provision of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, invited the City to develop a community alternative to protect the watershed and community from severe fire while restoring forest resilience. The RRS embraced the community design in the final AFR Stewardship Project, and the City endorsed it.

Success of AFR and the AFARI builds on collaborative relationships enabled by shared investment, understanding, and risk formalized in a 10-year Master Stewardship Agreement among the RRS, the City, Lomakatsi Restoration Project (LRP)—a local non-profit—and The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

As the land manager, the RRS is a critical partner and conduit for core funding. The City leads community engagement and brings experience managing its adjacent land. LRP brings foundational experience implementing projects under Stewardship Authority with a flexibly-scaled, skilled ecological-forestry workforce, integrating forestry contractors and workforce development, along with engaging diverse youth and tribal interests. The Nature Conservancy adds science engagement and a conservation perspective, leading multiparty monitoring for transparency and accountability. An Implementation Review Team provides external review by staff from the Oregon State University Extension Service, the environmental advocate Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands, and the SOFRC.

Under Stewardship Authority, retained receipts from the 14 mmbf restoration byproduct timber sold on AFR has been rolled back into the project, now nearly completed. With ongoing engagement, the community has developed a sense of ownership and pride in their accomplishment. And the City has provided for ongoing maintenance using controlled burning by



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHLAND FOREST RESILIENCY

Ashland Forest Resiliency partners, with one of >3,000 log truck loads of restoration by-product timber sold as part of the Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project.

establishing a water bill assessment that generates \$175,000 annually.

Modeling a 20-year project

To help bring such projects to a meaningful regional scale, the SOFRC and partners layered conceptual and design elements of the foundational collaborative projects into modeling a 20-year Rogue Basin Cohesive Forest

Restoration Strategy. These early projects demonstrated the integration of values through landscape design with strategic treatment placement and varied prescriptions to address the key shifts in forest composition, structure, and wildfire risk. The projects also generate timber as a byproduct of restorative forestry, while supporting the recovery of the northern spotted owl. The Rogue Strategy articulates a principled and comprehensive approach to restoring forest and community resilience to fire across the 4.6-million-acre basin. Completed in 2017, the Rogue Strategy articulates a collaborative vision for a 1.1 million acre, 20-year program of work that focuses on thinning and controlled burning. A quantitative wildfire-risk assessment is at the core of the Rogue Strategy, connecting complementary partners focused on landscape resilience, fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response.

The Rogue Strategy provides data,



PHOTO COURTESY OF LOMAKATSI RESTORATION PROJECT (JOSH BUDZIAK)

Lomakatsi sawyer fells young Douglas-fir encroaching on much older ponderosa pine.

tools, and approaches to integrating wildfire risk reduction with endangered species recovery and climate adaptation. It identifies forests to protect intact, then uses optimization software to place ecological thinning and controlled burning where accessible and appropriate. The outputs account for forest density reduction, reduced wildfire risk, and resulting timber revenue and jobs for three alternative scenarios. The all-lands scenario, mirroring the AFARI project, reduces wildfire risk to human communities and old growth habitats by 50%, while annually delivering 83 million board feet of federal timber, the restoration byproduct, to local mills.

Leveraging funding and engagement

Proactively treating 1.1 million acres over 20 years at a cost of \$600 million is daunting, requiring co-investment toward shared landscape-scale objec-

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tives. Modeling this co-investment, SOFRC, in partnership with eight core member organizations, has successfully secured funding from OWEB and match from partners to launch the new Rogue Forest Restoration Initiative (RFRI). The \$6 million/six year pledges

from OWEB, backed with \$3.8 million in match from an expanded group of partners, will touch down with treatment implementation and community engagement on six projects distributed across the Rogue Basin. Successive implementation of staged

projects distributed among management units will seed the approach in different communities. RFRI will leverage engagement on these initial projects to catalyze further understanding and support of new co-investments to expand and integrate across the basin.

To succeed, the RFRI Partnership must become a trusted institution with wide and diverse affiliations. Federal land treatments alone require a five-fold increase in the treatment schedule and funding. Considering the possible and potentially avoided costs (California spent \$15 billion in fire remediation and recovery from the 2018 fires), the investment in the Rogue Strategy appears wise. Industrial forest owners, the insurance industry, water utility fee payers, tribes, and county government could potentially become co-investors. Smoke impacts have spread the risk from localized fire-vulnerable locations to broad communities now energized to proactively manage forest landscapes. To our advantage in going to scale, the region retains a viable timber industry, a growing and highly-trained workforce, and significant economic activity.

Collaboratives are manifesting a proactive, middle way past historical tension between resource use and conservation, sidestepping a false dichotomy between the needs of people and nature. Fortunately, broad public and partner support for proactive, restorative mechanical treatments with controlled burning has been buoyed by successful projects and the positive news coverage about the SOFRC's Rogue Strategy. The AFARI and RFRI are grounded in best science and collaborative partnerships to integrate objectives and deliver long-term landscape-scale solutions. The Rogue Strategy provides a foundation for a shared landscape vision to transform society's reactive stance toward wildfire to proactively and positively engaging with fire. ♦

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Table 1: Prominent collaborative forest stewardship efforts in the Rogue Basin. Analyzed acres (ac) are of the entire landscape, from which fewer acres are planned or funded for treatment (Trt). Core partners were involved in project design, formal agreements and/or contributed substantial funding or match. Supportive partners provided review. Participating partners were engaged in workshops or field tours that informed project development and were only included if they were Core or Supporting partners in a separate project.

	Ashland Forest Resiliency	Applegate Pilot	Ashland Forest All lands Restoration	Rogue Forest Restoration Initiative	Rogue Basin Cohesive Forest Restoration Strategy
Timeline	2004-2020	2010-2013	2004-2025	2019-2025	2017-2037
Analyzed Ac	22,000	80,000	53,000	TBD	4,600,000
Planned Trt Ac	7,600	890	16,600	77,800	1,100,000
Funded Trt Ac	7,600	559	16,600	5,300	Developing
Organizations	Partner Type				
AP	—	Core	—	Participant	Participant
COA	Core	—	Core	—	Supportive
JACK	—	Core	—	—	Core
JOSE	—	—	—	—	Core
JSWCD	—	—	Core	Supportive	—
KBO	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive	Core	Participant
KSWILD	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive	—	Participant
LRP	Core	—	Core	Core	Core
MBLM	—	Core	Participant	Core	Core
NRCS	Supportive	Core	Core	Supportive	Participant
ODF	—	Participant	Supportive	Core	Core
OSU	—	Core	—	—	—
OSUEX	Supportive	Core	Supportive	Core	Core
OWEB	—	—	Core	Core	—
RRS	Core	Participant	Core	Core	Core
RVFC	—	—	—	Supportive	Supportive
SOFRC	Supportive	Core	Supportive	Core	Core
SOU	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive	—	—
TNC	Core	Participant	Core	Core	Core
USFWS	Core	Core	Supportive	Supportive	Core
UW	—	Core	—	—	—

*AP= Applegate Partnership; COA=City of Ashland; JACK=Jackson County; JOSE=Josephine County; JSWCD=Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District; KBO=Klamath Bird Observatory; KSWILD=Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands; LRP=Lomakatsi Restoration Project; MBLM=Medford District Bureau of Land Management; NRCS=Natural Resource Conservation Service; ODF=Oregon Department of Forestry; OSUEX=Oregon State University Extension Service; OWEB=Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board; RRS=Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest; RVFC=Rogue Valley Fire Chiefs; SOFRC=Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative; SOU=Southern Oregon University; TNC=The Nature Conservancy; USFWS=US Fish and Wildlife Service; UW=University of Washington