

Target Shooting as Forest Recreation

BY MIKE CAFFERATA

Merriam-Webster defines recreation as “refreshment of strength and spirits after work.” On a recent Saturday afternoon in the sunshine, my family and I hiked a short trail through the Tillamook State Forest. In the nearby area we could hear the pop, pop, pop of gunfire. These are the sounds of another group recreating in the forest. While many forest landowners consider target shooting to be a nuisance and ignore it as a use, it really belongs in the category of forest recreation and should be managed as part of your forestland management strategies.

Here in northwest Oregon, target shooting occurs on all sectors of forestland. On public lands, access is open and recreators head to the forest with the intent to target shoot; they travel until they find a location that suits their purpose. On private lands, owners often find target shooters parked at the gates and recreators that have walked into a suitable location (for them) to enjoy themselves. Still other target shooters have purchased forestland precisely to have a private location for target shooting. A final category are owners of forestland that find their relatives visiting their lands to target shoot—with or without the



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Large boulders are strategically placed to deter target shooters from shooting in unsafe areas.

primary owner's permission.

The mixture of landowner types and landowner rules can be confusing to target shooters, and many are unfamiliar with the forest environment and cannot identify if they are on private or public lands. Additionally, forest signs are inconsistently posted and maintained, policies differ by landowner, and clear information is often lacking online or elsewhere.

The result is that target shooters often head to the forest without a clear picture of where they are going and explore until they find a location that meets their needs. Few of them understand the risks they bring to the forest. For target shooters that own land, or have relatives that own land, they may shoot without trespassing, but are also often unaware of the shooting risks.

Better outcomes through management

In all cases, ignoring target shooting as a form of recreation overlooks the reality that it's a prevalent form of recreation. It brings great enjoyment, yet can cause great damage. Managing it will lead to better outcomes for all parties.

Many target shooters are respectful forest visitors and diligently follow safe and sanitary practices. Others do not, causing unsafe conditions and expensive cleanup. Many forest visitors do not like the noise of shooting and consider it a nuisance. Also, many shooters don't know that target shooting itself can cause forest fires. Bullets striking hard surfaces (rocks) have been demonstrated to start fires. The bullet's metallic casing fragments



PHOTOS COURTESY OF OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY

Before (left) and after photographs of a site improved for target shooting.

upon impact, and the superheated metallic shards falling on forest debris can start fires. Fire investigators determined this was the cause of the 2014 August Fire in the Oregon Department of Forestry's (ODF) Forest Grove District that closed Highway 26 for two nights and cost over \$300,000.

What options are available?

One example of target shooting management to consider is the work on the Forest Grove District of the Tillamook State Forest. Staff has worked to improve the target shooting situation for all users. This use has been a long-standing activity that is steadily growing and needs more attention.

Recognizing its growing popularity, staff is working to make target shooting a supported use that integrates with other forest activities. Members of the target shooting community from Northwest Firearms and Trash No Lands have partnered with ODF, along with individual enthusiasts and the surrounding community of man-

aged ranges and gun experts, to provide safe and sustainable opportunities for recreational target shooters. Together these partners have helped ODF identify safe locations and practices, as well as areas that should be closed.

Developing sound target shooting locations

Expertise provided by partners was used by ODF to identify locations that have the potential to align with forest goals. These locations were already getting heavy, unmanaged use, but had potential for safe backstops and were away from established recreation sites and sensitive resources. One of these sites had already experienced two recent target shooting-related wildfires.

Working with these groups, and after visiting regional target shooting ranges, staff modified and identified target shooting sites to increase safety and fire-safe aspects. These key improvements were made:

- Removing forest debris such as stumps, slash piles, and vegetation

that were magnets for targets, making the sites more attractive and easier to clean.

- Establishing obvious fire-safe backstops for targets to encourage users to place targets in safe locations.
- Controlling parking with large boulders, which limited parking to small groups and separated parking from shooting areas.
- Establishing table surfaces, thus improving user safety as guns remain in front of users, rather than transferring them between pick-up beds and the shooting area.

Improving these existing locations made target shooting safer and more enjoyable for the users, safer for other forest visitors, and aligned with forest goals. Volunteer groups regularly clean the sites and provide education for the public, both on site and through their social media outlets.

Closing poor shooting locations

Many popular shooting locations in the Tillamook experience continual

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problems. Some are close to streams, within earshot of rural forest residents, or are safety risks for other forest users. Many are fire risks as well. One very popular location had the additional safety hazard of no sound backstop and an open forest road behind the location. Staff works continually to manage these issues and integrate target shooting with other forest uses.

To manage the risks of target shooting and further other forest goals, a few of these locations were closed after the other locations were improved. The primary strategy used to close these locations was to eliminate parking and make the areas undesirable. Large boulders now line the roads and parking areas to prevent forest visitors from parking and shooting. Debris was added to the sites to make walking and standing difficult. Signs also alert visitors that the areas are closed. The areas were thoroughly cleaned to remove evidence of target shooting.

Limiting hazards where access cannot be controlled

For many landowners, gates are the most common solution to nuisance visitors; however, these are not always effective. Visitors may still use areas adjacent to public roads or within walking distance of the gates. For open public land such as the Tillamook Forest, gates can only be used in limited ways. In instances where gates are insuffi-



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Bullet fragments bouncing off this metal target are believed to have started a wildfire. Note the burned vegetation in the background.

cient, landowners can limit the hazards of target shooting by managing the sites. Fresh clearcuts with landings are an example of a common hazard. Shooters often use these locations because of the space to park and shoot.

In these locations on the Tillamook Forest, staff is working to reduce the hazards from target shooting and associated dispersed recreation. Landing debris and slash along the adjacent roads are piled cleanly. This reduces fuels, making wildfires less likely and slowing spread should one start. These piles are burned as soon as it can be done safely. This also reduces the temptation to place targets on convenient debris that lacks solid backstops, which leaves only earth backstops for target placement. For those landings overlooking trails or other areas with high public use, signs are posted alerting potential shooters to the hazards.

Applying strategies on private lands

Whether you allow target shooting or not, you can employ the following approaches to manage shooting.

Allowing target shooting. If you target shoot yourself, or have forest visitors that insist on target shooting, spend the time and effort to develop safe locations. One forest landowner has a grown son that brings his friends to their forest to shoot. Their forest is not set up with a safe shooting location. Without any established backstop or vegetation management, coupled with uninformed visitors, this is a risk for the forest and the neighbors. In addition, the location most often used

is down a dirt spur several hundred yards from the main road. While it is a nice place to shoot because it is out of sight from the neighbors, the location is at high risk of a fire start and difficult to access for emergency vehicles. This landowner does not want to exclude his family from using the forest and may not even be able to stop them if he wanted to.

This is an opportunity to employ the strategy of developing a safe location. Using a backhoe or other equipment, this owner could clear out slash from their repeated forest thinnings and establish a lane to shoot down. They could add a clean dirt or gravel backstop and develop a debris-free parking area with a turn-around. Then, with a small amount of vegetation management, this area could be kept grass free and fire safe for the enjoyment of all.

Discouraging target shooting. If you are a landowner that discourages target shooting, in addition to signs, consider the engineering fixes. Limit parking. Make the sites uncomfortable for visitors. Eliminate obvious locations to hang targets. Clean up any existing target shooting debris so new visitors will not think it is an acceptable location.

Reduce hazards. For those sites that cannot be modified to make unsuitable, or that continue to get use, consider how to limit exposure. Burn or remove slash that could contribute to fire spread. Remove target holders that lack backstops, especially old stumps with receptive fuel beds. Consider adding a pile of dirt or gravel just for use as a backstop to give shooters a safe and fire-safe alternative.

Forest recreation is personal. One person's recreation can be another's nuisance. While my family and I don't necessarily like hearing target shooting while out hiking, we also recognize that people are different and they are also enjoying their Saturday. We hope they do it responsibly and respectfully, keeping our forests safe for all uses. ♦

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