

Forest Contracting for a New Wildfire Reality

By Amanda Astor, CF

Experts agree more needs to be done in the woods to reduce fuel. The Governor's Council on Wildfire Response in Oregon identified 5.6 million acres of at-risk land that need to receive some type of treatment.



Forest management and fuels reduction are win-win activities for all states that have fire-prone forests. Active forest management maintains timber markets, healthy communities, jobs, forest health, and more. Fuels reduction activities, such as prescribed fire, removal of ladder fuels and road brushing, help to change fuel structures. When combined, forest management creates spaces between trees and pays for maintained roads while fuels reduction increases the likelihood for fire behavior to be less intense during incidents.

Any trained forester, experienced operator, or landowner will tell you that profitable and sustainable timber harvesting generates more funding to improve forest health and provides additional opportunities for costly non-commercial fuel reduction. But there have been questions about whether or not forest thinning activities alone actually reduce fire behavior, such that fires are less intense, less severe, and less impactful in dry, frequent-fire forests.

In the journal article "Mechanical thinning without prescribed fire moderates wildfire behavior in an Eastern Oregon, USA ponderosa pine forest," Oregon State University (OSU) researchers found

that "Thinning without prescribed fire significantly reduced potential crown fire immediately following thinning and also moderated surface modeled fire behavior beginning 2-3 years following thinning" in seasonally dry forests across western North America. This means that even when prescribed fire isn't combined with active forest management, the changes made to forest structure and fuel profile have a measurable effect on fire behavior. And Forest Service Chief, Randy Moore, recently told the House Subcommittee on Conservation and Forestry, "We must actively treat forests. That's what it takes to turn this system around."

Legislation and funding

At the federal level, the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) appropriates billions toward climate change solutions and wildfire mitigation that will significantly help to restore forests in the west. Over \$5.5 billion was included for the next five-10 years to address wildfire risk reduction and forest ecosystem restoration.

Oregon's SB 762 (Oregon Wildfire Omnibus Package) that was passed during the 2021 long session includes nearly \$45 million through the end of the biennium to address landscape resiliency and community risk reduction.

These funding levels provide opportunities for forest contractors to obtain new work and new skills because the goals laid out in the IIJA and SB 762 are only possible with an adequate contractor workforce. And the truth is, investing in the on-the-ground implementation and the workforce, truly pays dividends.

In 2012, Oregon prepared a cost benefit analysis and found that for every \$1 million spent on forest restoration there is \$5.7 million generated in economic returns. Additionally, for every \$1 invested in restoration the state saves \$1.45 in suppression.

This causal effect was observed in 2021 during the Caldor Fire when South Lake Tahoe narrowly avoided demise. Prescribed fire treatments along with other thinning and fuels reduction projects slowed or constrained the fire's otherwise rapid growth.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANDA ASTOR

To perform the landscape-level forest management and fuels reduction work that is needed in Oregon and across the West, financial and capital investments are needed to develop and maintain a well-trained contractor workforce.

Most recently in Oregon's 2021 Bootleg Fire, forestry and fire experts suggest that carefully developed forest restoration helped change fire behavior. Where mechanical thinning was combined with prescribed fire, fuel conditions allowed fire behavior to decrease resulting in crown fires to work their way back to the ground.

Contracting opportunities for new priorities

Most forest operators in Oregon are equipped for traditional forest management activities, such as clearcut or thinning operations with towers or yoders, cut-to-length systems, road maintenance and construction and others. However, work outlined in the IIJA and Oregon Wildfire Package is focused more intently on non-commercial fuels reduction. This means there is opportunity for forest contractors to diversify or pivot into crew work, prescribed fire, and restoration operations. There are also opportunities for new businesses to develop into the fuel's reduction space.

Contractors interested in pivoting to this new line of work will face a handful of barriers though. Some contractors used to operate in the crew workspace, but over time it became too complex, too costly or too time consuming. It is anticipated that the needs for this work and the significant funding sources will help incentivize this work for at least the next five-10 years.

The financial capital needed to purchase equipment, hiring personnel, and securing insurance is not insignif-

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icant. For example, equipment needed includes:

- Chainsaws
- Fire tools
- Drip torches
- OHVs/Side-by-sides
- Nomex
- Water tenders
- Bladder bags
- Water pumps
- Masticators
- Chipper
- Pick-up trucks

This is not an exhaustive list, and purchasing this equipment would require substantial investments. And the use of this equipment and the activities related to prescribed fire also require specialized training. It is vital these investments and this training occur well in advance of any request for proposal, service work contract, stewardship contract or other procurement method for services by the state or the federal agencies (USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management). And as fires have gotten more severe in recent history, insurance has been harder and harder to obtain. Many businesses have to pay more and receive less coverage than even a few years ago.

Solution development

For the past few years, the Oregon Prescribed Fire Council has met to address these barriers and passed language in SB 762 to develop a state-run Certified Burn Manager Program. This type of program would achieve some of the training needs associated with prescribed burning operations. It will also address liability and challenges in acquiring insurance for businesses doing burning operations.

In addition to liability coverage, other solutions are in the works. Associated Oregon Loggers (AOL) recently hired a Workforce Development Manager to create a workforce development program and is working on contractor workforce solutions with Oregon Department of Forestry. AOL has also been working at the federal level with the American Loggers Council and the Forest Resources Association to advocate for additional use of the H-2B visa program. These critical migrant workers complete the itinerant—seasonal and hard—work of reforestation and fuels mitigation.

Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs at high schools have also been getting additional attention. OSU is working to place equipment simulators at high schools with forestry CTE programs. Industry leaders are working to

identify additional barriers and possible solutions.

Ultimately, a multi-pronged approach to forest operator workforce development is necessary. Opportunity is truly on our doorstep, but guarantees are needed for businesses to incur the risk associated with starting and growing. *WF*

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Why Join SAF?

Wildlife biologists, restoration ecologists, forestry technicians, policy makers, urban foresters, research scientists, and foresters. The membership of the Society of American Foresters is as diverse as the professionals who are charged with managing our nation's and the world's natural resources for now and the future.

SAF is a 9,000-member community that has held true to its original objective to bring forestry and natural resources professionals together and keep them informed about the latest advances in forest science and management.

As a member of SAF, you have access to benefits that help you stay current with the latest science and connect with other professionals.

- At the SAF Career Center, you can search for jobs and post your resume.
- Working Groups provides opportunities for you to connect with other members in a particular field of interest.
- Internship programs help our student members get started on their career path.
- Local chapters hold monthly meetings that feature engaging scientific content, and state society annual meetings provide opportunities to learn more about statewide activities.

What is the value that Katie Nichols, PE, PLS, internal operations administrator and sustainability coordinator with Lone Rock Resources, gains from SAF?

I had been working at Lone Rock Resources for about six months when I attended my first OSAF chapter meeting hosted by the Umpqua Chapter. After being an inactive student member while attending Oregon State University, I was unsure whether I wanted to be involved with SAF in my professional life. At this meeting I met fellow foresters I now call friends. It was the welcoming atmosphere and the promise of knowledge that made me stay.

Over the last seven years, I have been given the opportunity to learn about a wide variety of topics from people around the nation. By participating in OSAF Annual Meetings, PNW Leadership Conference, and local Umpqua Chapter meetings, I have made personal and professional connections with people in the forest industry from all walks of life. Serving as Umpqua Chapter Education Chair and Chapter Chair, OSAF Delegate-at-Large, and Forester Fund Chair over the years has helped me improve my leadership and communication skills greatly.

Looking back on it now, I am grateful to my coworkers who pushed me to attend to that chapter meeting, and I look forward to the future to see how SAF grows and changes the lives of professionals young and old much like it did for me.

