

Report: Build up of dead trees causes extreme fire risk

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In a report commissioned by Douglas Timber Operators, fire historian Bob Zybach, PhD analyzed historic fire behavior in western Oregon and recent trends in wildfire activity. In his report, “A Growing Sea of Snags,” Zybach predicts that the massive amount of dead trees left after forest fires on federal lands will drastically alter both fire behavior and reduce options for fire managers.

“Without substantial changes in federal forest management, dead wood left after fires poses a increasing threat to firefighters, our communities, wildlife and other natural resources,” said Matt Hill, executive director for Douglas Timber Operators.

Zybach’s report included interviews with current and past fire managers, firefighters and othersexperienced with wildfire in Douglas County and the North Umpqua drainage in particular.

“Forests of dead trees are far more flammable, dangerous, and unsightly than forests of living trees,”wrote Zybach. “Dead trees become air-dried firewood, and dead forests become firebombs that almost certainly

will burn again and again, unless something is done to stop that process.”

Major findings of the Zybach report:

- Approximately 40% of the Umpqua National Forest has burned at least once in the last 20 years; many areas have burned 2-3 times in that period;
- As little as 1% of snags are being removed from federal burn areas – contributing to an over-abundance of dead trees in the North and South Umpqua drainages for the foreseeable future;
- The presence of snags across the landscape intensifies fire behavior and poses hazards to firefighters, reduces the ability to directly attack fires and leads to even more acres being burned;
- Attempts to manage a wildfire are made far more dangerous by burning snags;
- Burning snags can greatly increase the heat and severity of fire;
- Wildfire managers will be reluctant to directly attack fires in re-burn areas;
- Based on historic wildfire patterns in western Oregon, there will be a heightened fire risk in the upper North and South Umpqua watersheds for the next half century until snags are removed intentionally or by consequent wildfire;
- Re-burn areas may ultimately convert forest stands to another vegetation type altogether (e.g., brush field, hardwoods);
- Federal land managers are crippled before and after fires by the current suite of administrative land designations.

Recommendations:

- Federal land management designations should be reevaluated to allow land managers to reduce the threat of future fires to human and wildlife populations;
- Remove most snags from high-risk areas with residences, major roads, power lines, etc.;
- Fuels reduction along existing road networks can create a system of ready-made firebreaks;
- Reforestation projects can be used to create a network of strategic firebreaks;
- Open up riparian areas and ridgetops to more closely mimic early historic forest patterns;
- Replicate historic Indian burning practices in the Fall in places such as grassy prairies, ridgelines and berry fields.

The Zybach Report can be viewed at: <https://www.dougtimber.org/zybach>

