

Split the Biscuit

OREGONIAN
7/25/2003
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OSU researchers make a strong case for speedy salvage, reforestation and brush control on parts of the Biscuit fire

Billions of board feet of dead and dying timber stand where the Biscuit fire blazed across southwest Oregon last summer. If the past is prologue, nearly all of this public timber will be left to rot in the midst of tangled fields of brush and hardwood trees.

There is a better way, Oregon State University forestry professors point out in a significant new report on the Biscuit fire. But it requires decisive leadership in the Forest Service and Congress, quick action, public trust and the courage to challenge environmentalists who insist on "natural recovery" of burned lands.

Yes, all that is unlikely, given the paralysis on public forests. But the OSU report is a powerful argument for using part of the Biscuit lands to demonstrate that prompt salvage and reforestation, as private timberland owners have discovered, is the surest and quickest way to restore old-growth conifer forests.

In effect, the OSU professors are suggesting that the Forest Service split the Biscuit fire, salvaging in non-wilderness areas and using the large burned areas in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area as an experimental control. This is a "once in a generation" opportunity," they said, to show the tradeoffs of letting nature take its course versus salvage and reforestation.

Salvage would help not only the land, but also the people of southwest Oregon. At least two billion board feet of fire-killed trees and 500 million board feet of insect-weakened trees lie within two miles of existing roads and outside protected wilderness and wild and scenic areas. The report said the salvage-

able timber is worth at least \$100 million.

Maybe it's no longer fashionable to show concern for timber-dependent communities, but the Biscuit salvage would provide a sorely needed boost to the Southern Oregon economy. It would be a lifeline to the few remaining sawmills that have survived the near-total shutdown of public-lands logging in Oregon.

But there is no more time to waste. The value of the timber has eroded by tens of millions of dollars in the year since the fire. The burned trees will lose most of their value in two or three years. Meanwhile, the Forest Service is only now unrolling its red tape and preparing to release a draft environmental impact statement proposing to log 117 million board feet of dead trees on 5,500 acres. Given the likely appeals and delays, at best the first salvage sales on the Biscuit will begin next summer.

That is too little, too late. It is repeating the mistakes that are clearly evident in side-by-side comparisons of public and private lands burned in the 1990s. On public lands, where nature has taken its course, brush and undesirable hardwoods overwhelm conifers. On neighboring private lands scorched in the same fires, conifer forests are rapidly returning when the land is quickly salvaged, replanted and given a boost by herbicides that reduce brush.

The Biscuit fire was a historic blaze, the largest single fire in modern Oregon history. Now it offers a historic opportunity to demonstrate how burned-over public forests can best be salvaged and restored.