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Guest column

Guest column: Light it so you don’t have to fight it

By Skye Greenler, Christopher Dunn, and James Johnston
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(Andy Tullis/Bulletin photo)

Foresters in the southeastern U.S. like to say “every day is a burn day” — a far cry from the “only you can prevent wildfires” mantra common in the American West. These approaches may seem vastly different, but at their core they both seek to prevent the negative consequences of wildland fires. Recent controlled burns by the U.S. Forest Service in Eastern Oregon demonstrate how the former perspective is permeating western fire culture, and that’s a good thing.

Bend and Prineville residents awoke to smoky skies on the mornings of Sept. 14 and 15. For many, this may have been an ominous start to the weekend, however this smoke was different than the smoke from previous summers' fires. Drifting north from the Fremont-Winema National Forest, it was not from a carelessly extinguished campfire or lightning strike, but a carefully coordinated effort to intentionally burn 9,000 acres of public land to reduce future wildfire risk and help restore historical forest conditions. We should commend our fire management service for making this choice.

While prescribed fires are not new, managers and researchers increasingly recognize that to really make a difference across landscapes, bigger and better prescribed fires are necessary. The Fremont-Winema National Forest demonstrated, in a multiagency partnership, that large prescribed fires can be conducted safely and efficiently to produce desired outcomes across large areas. Forest and fire managers planned and prepared extensively for this burn — waiting until weather conditions aligned, containment lines were ready, contingency plans were developed, and smoke clearance was given. On Friday the 13th, an interagency group of fire responders mobilized to turn an otherwise ominous day into a success story.

The ecological outcomes of this burn will be evaluated in the coming years, but the risk reduction benefits were realized immediately. Fuels that had accumulated from more than 100 years of fire suppression were reduced, lowering future fire intensity, and ladder fuels that would have otherwise carried

fire from young trees to ancient old-growth pines were removed. This fire footprint will also have a low burn probability for several years and serve as a landscape fire break for nearby ignitions.

Compared to similar wildfires this burn was cheap. The total cost was approximately $175,000, or less than $20 per acre. In contrast, the 2014 Two Bulls Fire cost $875 per acre; the 2017 Milli Fire cost almost $700 per acre, and 2017 Rebel Fire cost over $900 per acre. The few inconvenient smoky mornings from this project pale in comparison to the weeks of dangerously high smoke impacts from large wildfires.

Our fire management professionals should be congratulated for these accomplishments and supported by the public to continue this good work. This support should extend to moments of unintended and undesirable consequences. Even the best planned burns can occasionally do unexpected things, but the outcomes will still be better than those occurring under hot, dry, windy, and uncontrollable conditions.

There is no future without fire in the American West, and it is time to rethink expectations of fire on our landscapes. This is not new — in the early 20th century the timber industry warned of the consequences of fire exclusion based on knowledge from Native Americans who have lived on these lands for thousands of years. Despite this, our collective response remains muted, and we are behind the curve. The most effective way to minimize the negative consequences of wildfire has always been with intentional fire use, and our fire management professionals have the skills to meet this need. This recent accomplishment by the Fremont-Winema National Forest staff is a huge leap forward, and we all owe them our gratitude and support to replicate this success story again, at even larger scales.

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