



Oregon State University researcher Chris Dunn next to a Douglas fir, which burned in Oregon's September fires and was later cut down by fire crews who considered it a safety hazard. (Jes Burns/OPB)

THE CUTTING

Despite What the Logging Industry Says, Cutting Down Trees Isn't Stopping Catastrophic Wildfires

For decades, Oregon's timber industry has promoted the idea that private, logged lands are less prone to wildfires. The problem? Science doesn't support that.

by Tony Schick, OPB, Oct. 31, 2020, 9 a.m. EDT

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As thousands of Oregon homes burned to rubble last month, the state's politicians joined the timber industry in blaming worsening wildfires on the lack of logging.

Echoing a long-standing belief in the state that public forests are the problem, U.S. Rep. [Greg Walden](#), a Republican who represents eastern Oregon, equated the federal government's management to that of "[a slum](#)

lord.” And Democratic Gov. Kate Brown on “Face the Nation” accused Republicans in the state’s Legislature of blocking measures, proposed by a wildfire council, that would have increased logging on public lands.

In the decades since government restrictions reduced logging on federal lands, the timber industry has promoted the idea that private lands are less prone to wildfires, saying that forests thick with trees fuel bigger, more destructive blazes. But an analysis by OPB and ProPublica shows last month’s fires burned as intensely on private forests with large-scale logging operations as they did, on average, on federal lands that cut fewer trees.

In fact, private lands that were clear-cut in the past five years, with thousands of trees removed at once, burned slightly hotter than federal lands, on average. On public lands, areas that were logged within the past five years burned with the same intensity as those that hadn’t been cut, according to the analysis.

“The belief people have is that somehow or another we can thin our way to low-intensity fire that will be easy to suppress, easy to contain, easy to control. Nothing could be further from the truth,” said Jack Cohen, a retired U.S. Forest Service scientist who pioneered research on how homes catch fire.

The timber industry has sought to frame logging as the alternative to catastrophic wildfires through advertising, legislative lobbying and attempts to undermine research that has shown forests burn more severely under industrial management, according to documents obtained by OPB, The Oregonian/OregonLive and ProPublica.

This year’s wildfires were among the worst that Oregon has experienced. They destroyed more than 4,000 homes across the state and consumed about 1 million acres of public and private land, nearly double the acreage as in previous years. Extreme winds drove fires across federal forest and industrial timber plantations, down through canyons and into populated areas like Sam Drevo’s community of Gates, about 45 minutes east of Salem.

Drevo stepped outside of his home Labor Day evening and saw flames racing across a clear-cut hillside a quarter mile away. He and his mother had time only to grab a bag of clothes before evacuating.

“I’m still kind of spinning. It’s hard to believe what just happened,” Drevo, a 44-year-old river guide, said. “The devastation of the loss, everything we lost in the house, everything that was sentimental to me. It’s just really hard to cope with that.”



Sam Drevo walks through wildfire damage in the town of Gates, Oregon, where he owned a home and river guide business. (Tyler Westfall for OPB)

As fires continue to threaten communities from California to Colorado, state and federal lawmakers have prioritized logging ahead of methods scientists say provide the best chance for limiting damage from wildfires, including prescribed use of fire to clear brush and programs that could help make homes like Drevo's more resistant to wildfire.

"This country has a huge amount of money," Cohen said, noting that annual firefighting costs have surpassed \$3 billion nationally. "But if you have a misperception of what the problem is, if you continually define it as a wildfire control problem, then that money largely goes into ineffective kinds of uses."

After last month's fires, the Oregon Forest & Industries Council, a statewide timber lobbying organization, spent thousands of dollars on Facebook advertisements promoting forest management to reduce wildfire risks. Four industry groups, including the council, published an opinion piece calling for the state to unite around logging, thinning and prescribed burns to reduce the buildup of dead and diseased trees on federal lands.

Sara Duncan, spokeswoman for the council, said logging is an effective tool for slowing wildfires. She said that this year's fires, which burned more than 275,000 acres of logged industrial timberland in Western Oregon, should be treated as an outlier because of winds that fueled unanticipated damage.

"In such an extreme event, any land would have burned, managed or not," Duncan said in an email.

The Campaign for Logging

The idea of managing forests to prevent wildfires began gaining popularity in the 1990s, after logging on public lands plummeted following court battles that led to protections for threatened species like the northern spotted owl.

Proponents of more logging have argued that a rise in the number of large fires in recent decades coincided with the slowdown in timber sales on federal lands.

In 2018, the Oregon Forest & Industries Council launched a campaign that featured a simple message: “Managed Forests Do Good Things. Catastrophic Wildfires Do Bad Things.” The campaign aims to “build a high-quality, on-line community of activists who will advocate for the industry to policymakers and elected officials,” according to an internal strategy document obtained by OPB, ProPublica and The Oregonian/Oregonlive.

Over the past decade, 80% of the acres burned in the state have been on federal land, according to data from Oregon’s Department of Forestry. The disparity in acres burned is in part because 60% of Oregon forests are managed by the federal government. Most of those forestlands are in drier, remote areas prone to more frequent fire, compared with private forest lands.

Fires on private industrial timberlands can be more quickly suppressed because firefighters have more access through roads, making data that shows the intensity or severity of fires an incomplete metric for damage, industry groups said.

“More important is how the fire spreads and how easy it is to control,” Duncan said in an email. “Fires on private forestlands are easier to put out because fuels are more receptive to suppression efforts, and access is maintained through roads.”



A stretch of private industrial timberland that burned in the Holiday Farm Fire. (Jes Burns/OPB)

Because the state and federal governments have tried to put out every wildfire for decades, forests that would have been cleared of vegetation by frequent, naturally occurring fires became overgrown. Logging or thinning could provide jobs and wood for local mills, but scientists say it won't prevent destructive wildfires like the ones the state experienced this year.

Logging doesn't eliminate the underbrush, twigs and tree needles that fire feeds on. Removing brush and debris requires fire. That includes "prescribed fire," using drip torches to safely burn across the forest floor during cooler weather.

A forest that is thinned must then be purposely burned to reduce wildfire spread. But in Oregon, more than 1 million acres of federal land have been thinned in the past 10 years, while landscape burning has been completed on less than half that amount, according to data from the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Homes most often ignite from flying embers, not flames, and research from the U.S. Geological Survey found vegetation levels on public lands were a poor predictor of home destruction in a wildfire.

Scientists with the U.S. Forest Service and wildfire insurance industry say adapting communities to withstand wildfire by clearing vegetation and using fire-resistant construction like closed eaves, covered vents and double-pane windows provide the best chance to prevent home losses.

In Oregon, neither the state nor federal government track money spent on preventing home ignitions.

Matt Donegan, a former timber investor and consultant who led Brown's Wildfire Response Council, acknowledged thinning may not be effective in the rainy forests of western Oregon because the trees would grow back before wildfire.

Donegan said the damage caused by wildfires this year, which was almost entirely on the west side of the state, will likely prompt a special legislative session. He expects a debate over how much state funding should go toward fireproofing private residences.

"I think one of the most vexing topics Oregon will face is what do you do with the west side forests?" Donegan said. Wildfire there is "not going to happen often but when it does, my heavens, the impacts are so great."

The governor's wildfire council put forth a set of recommendations this year that

included increasing the state's firefighting capacity, creating a buffer around homes and requiring electric companies to shut down power lines during high winds.

The council's most expensive recommendation called for the state to spend \$4 billion over the next 20 years on forest management, primarily on thinning. Funding for the proposal would have covered fewer than half of the total acres in Oregon considered at high risk of wildfire.

The cost estimate didn't include maintenance treatments of prescribed fire, which the council acknowledged are "essential for maintaining risk reduction over time."

"Researchers and Their BS Study"

About an hour east of Eugene in a patchwork of heavily managed public and private timberland, with hundreds of acres of clear-cutting and thinning in every direction, the community of Blue River was completely leveled by September's 173,000-acre Holiday Farm Fire.

Picking through the burned husks of buildings and cars, researcher Chris Dunn pointed to a nearby hillside that had been logged before the fire.

"That kind of management clearly didn't provide community protection," said Dunn, who spent eight years as a wildland firefighter. He now studies fire behavior and risk for Oregon State University and the Forest Service.

In 2018, Dunn co-authored a study with Humboldt State University's Harold Zald that found the 2013 Douglas Complex Fire in southern Oregon burned 30% more severely on private industrial timber plantations than on federal forestlands.

Dunn said the research wasn't intended to target the timber industry. It was meant to explain why the fire burned in a particular pattern. He thought perhaps industry leaders might use the study to push for better fire protection funding for their lands, which provide society's wood supply and could be susceptible to burning.

But the findings challenged a report by the Oregon Forest Resources Institute, a tax-funded forest education agency overseen by timber companies. The institute's report had pointed to the same fire to caution that unlogged public lands contributed to damage on private lands.

"While the study is not receiving attention, enviros are using it, and it is out there as a matter of record," then-director Paul Barnum wrote to staff in 2018 in an email obtained by The Oregonian/Oregonlive, OPB and ProPublica. "Without someone challenging the study, those accessing it in the future may assume it's legit."

Barnum declined to answer specific questions about the study by Dunn and Zald. He said his emails were not relevant to this year's fires.

The institute drafted a guest opinion refuting the study and sought input from industry groups before submitting it to a local newspaper.

"From beginning to end I would keep the focus on these two specific researchers and their BS study," advised Nick Smith, a lobbyist for the national timber group American Forest Resources Council.

In response to emailed questions, Smith said he took issue with the researchers' "broad policy conclusions" and thought the study didn't contribute much to the protection of forest values or communities.

The institute's opinion piece ran nearly two months after the study was published, under the heading "Replanted forests don't increase intensity of wildfire."

Dunn said no one from the industry reached out to him before criticizing his findings.

"Why wouldn't someone just email me and ask me about it and talk," Dunn said. "It's like creating a false perception of me being against them or them being against me, and that's completely incorrect."

Land Managed, Homes Lost

Days after the September fires wreaked havoc in Oregon communities, Congress had a hearing on a comprehensive wildfire bill.

In the Senate, Democrat Dianne Feinstein of California and Republican Steve Daines of Montana introduced a wildfire bill focused primarily on expanding logging. The bill, which also includes prescribed burning and

funding for home construction, would provide additional exemptions on environmental and legal reviews for logging to help mitigate wildfire.

Logging didn't help Drevo's community of Gates. Five of the nine houses on his street survived because they were built to be fire resistant or their owners doused them with sprinklers during the blaze. Drevo, who didn't learn he could fortify his home until it burned down, said politicians should focus on making communities more fire-resistant.

"You look at what happened in my little microcosm," Drevo said, "and the fact that there was an area that was heavily logged, and it was a huge inferno that helped add to the destruction of our community."

Late last year, Sen. Kamala Harris, a California Democrat and her party's nominee for vice president, sponsored a bill to create a \$1 billion grant program for making homes more resistant to wildfires. Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden co-sponsored the bill in September. He also filed a separate bill seeking a \$300 million federal investment in the use of prescribed fire.

Neither bill has received a hearing.

Jes Burns of OPB and Rob Davis of The Oregonian/Oregonlive contributed reporting.