

Roving Reporter

Smoke and fire—how much worse?

BY TOM CARSTENS

In January, State Representative Pam Marsh hosted a wildfire forum in Medford. She assembled a panel of state and local fire experts, who discussed some issues regarding wildfire familiar to many of us in the Applegate Valley.

After the 1910 Big Burn in Montana and Idaho, the US Forest Service (USFS) adopted a goal of snuffing out any fire before it reached ten acres in size—and by 10 am. The resultant decline in natural landscape fires has contributed to an outsized accumulation of forest fuels and pretty much made that target unattainable anywhere in the West.

“Fire is now exploding across our landscape,” said one panel member. And new undergrowth is accumulating every year. Dave Lorenz, Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) Southern Area Director, said that five of the last six fire seasons have been worse than average—by a long shot. According to him, our fire seasons are now 60 days longer and “we’re way behind the power curve.” The panel concluded that, on our present trajectory, we’re looking at three decades of worsening fire and smoke.

A 2018 USFS study declared that more than 106,000 homes in Jackson and Josephine counties are at risk from wildfires (“Exposure of Human Communities to Wildfire in the Pacific Northwest”). See the map provided by The Nature Conservancy.

Protect your property

Failure to protect our rural homes can present a real problem for attack crews. The biggest issue for them is access to our properties. It’s up to us

to maintain our driveways to allow their vehicles to reach us. Around our homes we must establish firebreaks and reduce the fuel loads. If we fail to set these conditions beforehand, we run the risk that firefighters will bypass us for safety reasons.

The panel also made a point of telling the audience to *never* assume a fire has been called in—we should always call 9-1-1 right away.

The panel pointed out that our state legislature earmarks funds toward fire suppression, but very little toward prevention. Mechanical prevention—prescribed burns and thinning—must be scaled to the landscape level. There’s not much profit in this, so it’s going to be expensive.

The Southern Oregon Forest Restoration Collaborative (SOFRC) has examined this issue in the “Rogue Basin Strategy,” a scientific study

with a road map for developing healthier forests that will, in turn, protect our communities. The study acknowledges up front that outdated forest management practices have contributed to our current state of affairs. Several options were presented, none of which would require new roads. One option targets roughly a million acres for thinning and undergrowth burning with an annual bill of \$30 million. Though costly, it could have substantial benefits:

- 50 percent reduction in risk to homes
- 47 percent reduction in risk to old-growth forests
- Improved smoke management
- Annual harvest of 83-million board feet of merchantable timber (The study’s authors make clear, however, that this income will not cover the cost of thinning.)



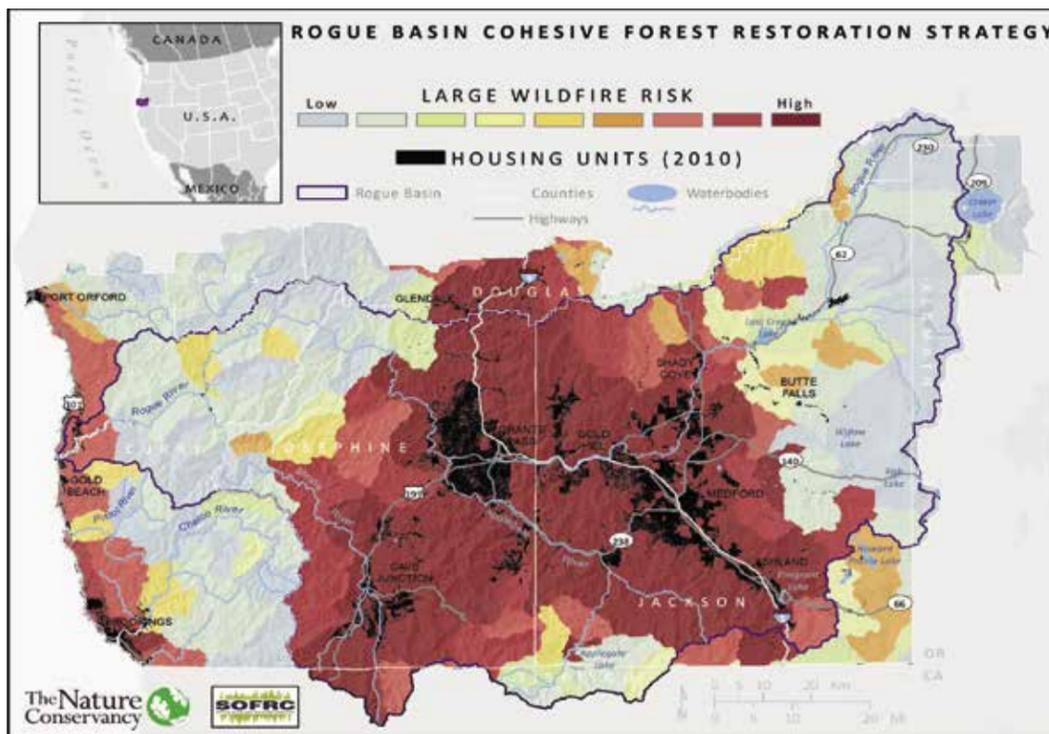
Wildfire Forum hosted by Representative Pam Marsh in January in Medford. Photo: Tom Carstens.

- 1,700 jobs
- \$260 million in local economic output

Some Applegaters are wondering if we’re ever going to actually put additional resources toward proactive forest management. All of our federal, state, and county representatives agree that we need to get more boots on the ground. Studies confirm that budgets will have to reflect this need.

There *are* a few bright spots. Both Jackson and Josephine counties have signed off on the 295-page Rogue Valley Integrated Fire Plan, a community wildfire protection plan. Governor Brown has established a committee to examine wildfire response statewide. ODF has proposed new smoke management rules to facilitate prescribed burning. ODF is also looking at newer technology that will help them detect fires sooner. The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board has recently awarded a grant of \$1.5 million to accelerate forest thinning in the Rogue Valley. Some of that money will go to the Applegate Valley. According to SOFRC, an additional \$4.8 million will be apportioned in the Rogue Valley between 2020 and 2025.

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Burn reminder
 Before burning outdoors any time of year, check with your fire district to make sure that day is an official burn day and not a **NO** burn day.
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