

# Fire hazard? Take away all those ‘ladder fuels’

BY TOM CARSTENS

There I was, sitting in an Oregon State University Extension class for landowners. We were discussing the degrees of drought tolerance for tree species in our area. Douglas “Doug” fir wasn’t high on the list. Suddenly everything became clear: this must be why my Doug fir trees keep dying! All my other trees do just fine.

Sound familiar? It should—we can see large clumps of dead and dying Doug fir trees all over the Applegate Valley. Even now, when I look across the valley at Ferris Gulch, it makes my heart sick. When they go up in flames—and they will—it’s not going to be pretty. Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) and Applegate District fire crews will have their hands full protecting homes.

Just after that class, Aaron Krikava published an article in this paper offering help to private property owners who might want to do some controlled burning to

remove unwanted forest undergrowth—so-called ladder fuels. I’d only heard of this being done on large public land tracts, so I was interested to see how this could work on a smaller private parcel.

As it happened, the US Forest Service was offering a field trip to examine the results of a prescribed burn in the Upper Applegate, so I signed up. What I saw was not forest destruction, but a clearing of hazard fuels between the trunks of thriving, established trees. The forest canopy remained intact and healthy. The added bonus was that it mimicked the natural restorative process of periodic wildfire.

Okay, I thought, this is what I want to do. But first I had to get rid of all those beetle-infested fir trees before I introduced fire on my property, which hadn’t seen a flame in over 90 years. A neighbor put me in touch with a local logger. In exchange

for a couple of truckloads of millable logs, he agreed to help me thin my forest and pile the slash. Some of my neighbors were able to gather some of the smaller logs for firewood. For a lighter touch, we brought in a team of large Percheron horses to skid the Doug fir logs.

Now—how to deal with all those slash piles? I asked Biomass One if they’d be interested in chipping the waste for energy. They were, but they couldn’t negotiate my steep drive. So I contacted Josh Weber, the owner of Greenpath Landscape, to help me burn those piles. On burn days, we gradually worked through the slash. Afterwards, the property looked much more open. Taking advantage of the pandemic slowdown, I continued to manually thin my property of more fuel hazards. I dug out troublesome blackberry patches, removed buckbrush overgrowth, cut and piled smaller dead trees, limbed others, and burned the waste. Once this was done, I felt confident and ready to finish the job with a controlled burn.

Aaron and Mel Wann of the Applegate Partnership drafted a 69-page burn plan and put me in contact with Grayback Forestry, a local company with a lot of experience managing burns on large public tracts. I began talking to my neighbors to let them know what was going to happen. I dug a protective hand line around my house. Josh and a neighbor helped me put in more fire lines where needed. ODF looked over the plan, inspected the lines, and issued a burn permit.

When the weather conditions met ODF guidelines, we notified Applegate Fire District. Grayback Forestry brought out a couple of fire engines, a water tender, and a crew of 24, who ringed the entire property with charged fire hose. Small, controlled flames slowly licked up the ground litter and duff. Five hours after light-off, it was done. I had a clean, fire-resistant forest floor.

Expecting another bad fire season, I feel about as protected as possible. Collectively, there are enough of us Applegaters who own a sizable quantity of dry forest land; maybe we can contribute to reducing the fire hazard for all of us. Controlled burning can help.

It’s worth considering.  
Tom Carstens  
541-846-1025



Tom Carstens brought in Percheron draft horses to move logs while thinning fuel from his property. Photo: Tom Carstens.



Tom Carstens scrapes a fire line around his house. Photo: Kathy Carstens.



Greenpath Landscape helps burn slash piles to reduce fuel load on the property. Photo: Tom Carstens.

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### Drought-tolerant trees in southwest Oregon

*Ranked highest to lowest*

- Oregon White Oak
- California Black Oak
- Ponderosa Pine
- Incense Cedar, Pacific Madrone
- Douglas Fir
- Port Orford Cedar
- White Fir

On sites where these species co-occur, expect greater loss of the less drought-tolerant species (e.g., loss of Douglas fir on sites with Douglas fir and oak).

*Courtesy Oregon State University Extension Service*

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