



Public deserves an honest debate over logging and wildfires



By Mark Turner

Has anyone else noticed that some environmental types seem so dead set against logging, that they would rather burn up our national forests than allow any kind of logging to take place? Their tendency is to spin the facts, in order to make the public think that logging is always bad.

Out here in Oregon, last year, we had another record year of forest fires. You would think that everyone would recognize the importance of not burning up our forests, for a whole host of reasons. Not these environmentalists, though. Their first claim is that it's all because of climate change. Now I'm not here to make any claims about the validity or invalidity of climate change. All I know is that our National Forests are burning up. However, that is not true of our well managed private forest lands. In fact, about the same amount of fires started on private land as on Federal land. However, over 95% of the acres burned were on federal land. If it was all due to climate change, wouldn't just as many private acres burn as public?

My contention is that it is all about how the forests are managed. Our private forests are generally healthy and productive. While our public forests are generally unmanaged, unhealthy and unproductive.

Our environmentalist friends don't seem to be concerned by this, however. In fact, there is at least one well known "scientist" that has been touting the importance of fires to the ecology. While I'm sure that there is some validity to that statement, as long as the fires are on a small scale. However, when the fires get to the scale that we have seen in recent years, the negatives far outweigh the positives.

And how about all the emissions that these fires produce? Here in Oregon there is a big push to reduce our carbon emissions. A new gas tax here and a diesel tax there. Plus proposals for carbon taxes. However, they don't seem to care that the small savings in carbon emissions these schemes will produce, are minuscule compared to the carbon emissions from our forest fires. If we could keep our forests from burning, we would not only reduce the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere, as long as these forests are healthy, we will be taking carbon out of the atmosphere.

The next issue is the erosion that these large fires cause. Most of these large fires occur on steep and sometimes unstable slopes. Many of us in the timber industry were wondering what the environmentalist's response would be when the heavy rains came this fall and the hillsides started washing away? You can only imagine how surprised I was to hear a Forest Service employee explaining, over the radio, that "there was much needed turbidity and a lot of large woody debris going into the streams in the burned areas". Then went on to explain that "it would be really good for the fish".

To say that I was flabbergasted, would be an understatement! Particularly since we are not allowed to put any turbidity into any streams, from our logging operations. In fact, a few years ago, there was a lawsuit claiming that turbidity from a logging operation should be considered pollution. In my book, turbidity is turbidity. If it is considered pollution when it comes from a logging operation, it should also be considered pollution, when it comes from a burned area. Or in fact from anywhere.

And finally, what about all of the habitat loss? Many of you may remember all of the loggers that were put out of business, when the spotted owl was listed? Well, it turns out that the biggest threat to the spotted owls aren't loggers. They are Barred owls and forest fires. It turns out, recent data has shown that spotted owl habitat is especially susceptible to large forest fires. In fact, Spotted Owl habitat burns hotter and more completely than most other areas.

I think it's time for a much more frank and honest discussion about these issues. For my part, I think we would be much better off to actively manage these forests. Making them more fire resistant and utilizing the extra materials for lumber and biofuels, rather than sending them up in smoke.

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The American Loggers Council is a 501 (c)(6) not for profit trade association representing professional timber harvesters and log truckers in 32 states across the United States with headquarters near Hemphill, Texas.