



Constantly PUTTING OUT FIRES

ROSEBURG FOREST PRODUCTS, ONE OF THE NATION'S LARGEST PRIVATE FOREST LANDOWNERS, HAS DEVELOPED A RAPID RESPONSE PROCESS TO HANDLE OREGON'S EVER-INCREASING NUMBER OF WILDFIRES AND THEIR AFTERMATH. SUCH A STRATEGY WOULD BE LARGELY UNNECESSARY IF NOT FOR DECADES OF GOVERNMENT FOREST POLICY THAT KEEPS FUELING THE FIRE.

BY PETE WILLIAMS

Phil Adams is speaking passionately about Oregon wildfires, replanting efforts, and the government's poor response. As Adams, the Director of Timberlands for Roseburg Forest Products, navigates a Ford F-150 along the company's well-maintained but tight hillside roads here in Douglas County, FLA CEO Scott Jones and I make it a point not to look at the steep drop to our right.

We have nothing to worry about on this chilly Wednesday morning in late November as we tour the staggering damage from the Archie Creek Fire from a year earlier. For decades, Roseburg has used this 20,000-acre tract of Douglas fir as a showcase, hosting everyone from schoolchildren to university researchers to elected officials, and Adams knows it well enough that he probably could drive blindfolded, though we're thankful he's keeping his eyes on the road.

Below us are the charred remains from the fire, called the most destructive ecological event in the Umpqua Basin since the eruption of Mount Mazama 10,000 years ago. A perfect storm of 90-degree temperatures, 50-plus mile-per-hour winds, and single-digit humidity allowed the blaze to torch more than 105,000 acres in its first 48 hours with a power and intensity firefighters said sounded like a jet engine.

According to *The News-Review* newspaper of Roseburg, Oregon, the state's 2020 fires destroyed 15 billion board feet of lumber, equal to four times Oregon's statewide timber harvest, enough wood to build 1 million homes.

"This was the fire of all fires for us," said Adams, who would know, having watched more



FLA CEO Scott Jones (second from right) joins Roseburg employees to view the fire-charred forests left standing by the Bureau of Land Management a year after the Archie Creek fire, wood that will contribute to future fires.

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than 48,000 acres of Roseburg forests impacted by five fires since 2013 alone.

Roseburg, the 86-year-old, integrated, “forest-to-finish” products company with more than 600,000 acres of forestland and 3,000 employees, can absorb the destruction better than other landowners. Because of the frequency of the fires, Roseburg’s crews have become adept at springing into action to help with firefighting and salvage operations.

In twelve months, Roseburg salvaged and replanted its Archie Creek Fire-damaged acreage in Douglas fir, the Oregon native species that accounts for more than 96 percent of its forests. That’s no small task considering the degree of difficulty of working on such hilly terrain, which is challenging enough under normal conditions that it makes commercial thinning unrealistic during the typical 40-to-55-year rotation of Douglas fir.

But what makes the process more frustrating for forest landowners such as Roseburg, whose lands inevitably butt up against federal property, is the government’s refusal to remove its fire-damaged trees, making such public lands a tinder box for future fires.

Adams pulls the truck over. Behind us, Roseburg employees Gabe Crane, the Director of Resource Operations and Sales; and Tiffany Roddy, Manager of Government Affairs, hop out of a second vehicle. We make our way to the edge of a clearing which 15 months earlier would have provided a spectacular view of Douglas fir growing along hillsides.

Instead, the landscape is brown, either clear-cut acreage belonging to Roseburg or still-standing, charred trees on federal property overseen by the Bureau of Land Management. Forestland is a checkerboard of ownership, which is especially

evident when square-mile sections (640 acres) of dead BLM trees stand alone.

Crane, who helped oversee salvage and replanting operations, points off in the distance at one BLM parcel. “That was a 150-year-old stand,” he said. “You have at least 300 tons an acre left standing to rot.”

If not contributing to the next fire disaster. Adams shakes his head. “Roseburg has been at the tip of the spear in advocacy of post-fire recovery plans,” he says. “We beat our brains out trying to insert some sort of reasonable compromise for the government to do something smart on the landscape that protects us all. This is a loser for all landowners. That ridge of dead old growth is a problem for all of us. We regularly get dry lightning storms in this country. That dead wood will serve as heavy fuel for five years from now when we’ll have another fire and have to do this all over again.”

Oregon wasn’t always such a bureaucratic challenge for forest landowners, of course. No part of the country, after all, is more associated with the timber industry than the Beaver State. Atop the state Capitol in Salem stands a statue of a golden pioneer carrying an ax. High schools and their mascots take their names from mills and loggers. Each time a member of the Portland Timbers, the Major League Soccer team, scores a goal, the team’s logger mascot cranks a chainsaw and cuts a round off a Douglas fir, the same tree featured on state license plates.

As recently as the mid-1980s, timber was the highest-value crop in the United States, outselling cotton in the South and corn in the Midwest. The U.S. Forest Service, a division of the

Department of Agriculture, sold enough timber out of the Pacific Northwest to account for 25 percent of the national output. In Oregon, timber sales funded local counties, which received hundreds of millions each year for roads and schools.

Then came the listing of the northern spotted owl as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act through its range of northern California, Oregon, and Washington by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1990. A court order the following year stopped logging in national forests containing the owl. In 1994, the Clinton Administration adopted the Northwest Forest Plan in response to the spotted owl, though the plan came to include much broader habitat protection goals.

Over the next 30 years, the public perception of logging and timber harvests in Oregon and elsewhere soured. The U.S. Forest Service, pressured by environmental groups, largely stopped managing public lands for timber and became more of a regulatory body. The ranks of threatened and endangered species on the USFWS lists soared.

States even mostly stopped cutting salvage wood under pressure from environmentalists. As recently as November, a federal judge ruled that the U.S. Forest Service could not log along 400 miles of forestland in the Willamette National Forest in order to clear fire-damaged trees from forest roads. Three conservation groups sued, saying the project was large-scale salvage logging in disguise and that it would degrade water quality and wildlife habitat. A judge agreed.

The American Forest Resources Council had argued that leaving the trees standing posed a safety risk for those in the forest for work or recreation. “People shouldn’t have to risk death or injury to access their public lands,” the group said in

a statement. “Failure to remove hazard trees ensures dangerous conditions for firefighters, first responders and anyone traveling through these burned landscapes.”

Even as the importance of wood products continued to grow, the regulations and challenges for forest landowners have increased. That’s especially true on the west coast, where the scale of regulations and bureaucracy seems to match the awe-inspiring scale of the forests.

In 2017, Roseburg sold its 170,000 acres of California forests and months later bought 158,000 acres in North Carolina and Virginia, adding 30,000 more acres on the east coast last year.

Roddy, Roseburg’s Manager of Government Affairs, says she marvels at how the same young people attracted to Oregon by its many outdoor recreational opportunities see cutting trees – any trees - as a non-starter, even when that enhances recreation and wildlife. That attitude, which has grown over the last generation, impacts policy.



Phil Adams, the Director of Timberlands for Roseburg Forest Products, points out one of the thousands of Ponderosa pine seedlings planted amid squares of white cloth and placed in protective Vexar tubes.



The Archie Creek Fire has been called the most destructive ecological event in the Umpqua Basin since the eruption of Mount Mazama 10,000 years ago.

“In Oregon, as opposed to the East Coast, every bit of your forestry job has some type of law or regulation that pertains to it,” says Roddy, a Penn State University-trained forester who shifted to government affairs with Roseburg. “Every time you turn around some other grassroots organization pops up but the way I approach it is that you have to understand what’s driving that view.”

Forest landowners throughout the country would welcome the passing of the Disaster Reforestation Act, the legislation that would allow landowners to at least deduct the value of their timber lost through natural disasters. That’s perhaps even truer in Oregon, where Roseburg spends between \$650 and \$700 per acre between planting, spraying where needed, and prescribed burning.

After a disaster, the cost for salvage goes up because of the availability of loggers working on deadline before the wood rots. “Think of every piece of the restoration project that has to occur,” Adams says. “You have seedlings and bed space at the nurseries. Greenhouses are at capacity and you’re competing for chemical application crews, helicopters, the chemicals themselves for site prep, and herbaceous treatments. The system is strained and costs go up.”

Fires have become so routine in Oregon that Roseburg “manages rehabilitation,” Adams says. That means advance ordering of bedspace and greenhouse space for seedlings, arranging for crews – even reserving more culverts. Driving around the Roseburg property, we see piles of black plastic culverts replaced following the fire.

At one point, we come across a crew of H-2B workers planting seedlings. Watching these younger men quickly scamper down hillsides, installing Douglas fir in a seamless motion with little wasted effort, it’s clear why many workers lack the work ethic and stamina to perform grueling labor that’s downright athletic.

But the most jaw-dropping, head-scratching part of the tour comes when Adams parks alongside a BLM-managed stand



An H-2B worker plants seedlings along hilly Roseburg terrain.

of charred Douglas fir. From a distance there appear to be patches of snow underneath the mostly dead trees. Upon closer inspection, it’s not snow but thousands of 18-inch squares of white cloth. Each square surrounds a seedling – an off-site Ponderosa pine seedling, of all things, planted in a forest of dead Douglas fir – and placed in protective Vexar tubes.

Cost to American taxpayers? About \$2.25 for each non-indigenous sapling, matt, and tube. Adams bends down over a seedling and shakes his head.

“You have a weed matt around the pine tree and then for whatever reason, they’ve added a Vexar tube and bamboo stake to presumably protect the tree from deer and elk browsing. Our experience is that deer and elk do *not* browse Ponderosa pine,” he says, sighing. “You’re underplanting a

shade-intolerant species under a stand of trees with no long-term ecological function. There’s no opportunity to take this down a different reforestation pathway. We’re not saying apply private practices to public land, but let’s do something, which is better than nothing.”

In theory, fifty percent of proceeds from public timber harvests revert to Oregon counties. “It was supposed to support the county to fund schools and county services,” Roddy says. “When you stop salvage logging, there’s no way to make that up. Think of how that affects rural schools, mills, and jobs. That money could go theoretically to Douglas County. Instead, it’s all rotting on the stump.”

Rotting on the stump until it fuels the next fire. The Who’s Roger Daltrey famously sang of how “after the fire, the fire still burns,” a lyric that seems like it could refer to Oregon’s cycle of fire.

“Letting all that wood rot creates fuel for future fires,” Roddy says. “These trees are lightning rods for storms that come through this mountain system. This is going to burn again. It’s just a question of when.”

Pete Williams is editor of Forest Landowner magazine.



Roseburg employees plotted recovery efforts while the Archie Creek Fire still burned.

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