



# All this warmth smells like smoke

by Tracy Warner | Feb. 13, 2015, 11:08 a.m. | Comment  
Editorial

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We may be enjoying this lovely spring-in-February weather, pulling out the shorts or prepping the lawnmower, but I can't help thinking of what might come by late July. Who knows how the weather will treat us between now and then, but right now I can almost smell the smoke. It is truly a shame when that feeling of sunny warmth on your cheek brings a tightness in the stomach. Too warm, too dry, and summer fires will be our punishment. Not again, please.

After saying a no-fire prayer, it may be useful to remind ourselves again that fire is the natural order in our chosen land. The eastern slopes of the Cascades, with the desiccating rain shadow, non-existent humidity and scouring winds are primed for flame. We all know that. We have lived it. But the record-breaking conflagrations of recent years have a considerable human contribution, from the way we have managed our forests, from our preference in home sites, and now or soon our dumping of carbon in the atmosphere. Perhaps the biggest mistake of all is our reluctance to pay for what we know needs to be done.

The scope of the problem became more apparent this week with the release of a significant study by the U.S. Forest Service and Nature Conservancy, proposing a new approach to evaluating the need to restructure forests in Oregon and Washington. Said the study's co-author Ryan Haugo in a release: "This study provides a broad perspective on the extensive forest restoration needed to protect the many values for which we depend upon our forests — clean air and water, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, timber and jobs. It also highlights the need for coordination across governments, agencies and landowners and the importance of detailed on-the-ground planning to bring in additional considerations such as aquatic conditions and restoration needs."

The issue is not small. The study shows that to restore forests to something like a natural state, not thickly overgrown and neglected, "more resilient to natural disturbances like fires, insects and diseases," some sort of treatment, or "active management" or "disturbance" is necessary on over 500,000 acres — just in Chelan and Okanogan counties. The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest has the wherewithal to treat about 20,000 acres a year. It is "simply not enough to keep up," says the release from the NCW Forest Health Collaborative.

Treatment involves thinning, removing brush, prescribed burns, natural burns and harvest. Funding is hard to come by. The Forest Service, caretakers of the majority of public land in this region, has seen its budgetary discretion burned away. To fight fires today we spend money needed to prevent fires tomorrow. The cost of fighting wildfire routinely tops \$1 billion a year. In most years the Forest Service is forced into "fire borrowing" — draining of funds for forest management to pay for firefighting.

Bills to change this destructive practice, to fund firefighting as we do our response to any other natural catastrophe, have been introduced regularly, and dropped into the congressional waste. Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, have introduced the anti-fire-borrowing bill again. So have Reps. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, and Kurt Schrader, D-Ore. President Obama's proposed 2016 budget would do much the same thing, creating a separate disaster account to pay for the worst fires. "Until we address this issue, anything we do to increase needed management activities in the forests, like hazardous fuels removal, timber harvest, conservation, or trail maintenance, will continue to be lost in fire transfers," said Schrader. "Fixing the wildfire budget is the critical first step in making our forests healthier and, ultimately, reducing the cost of wildfires in the future."

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