

Logging Does Not Reduce Fire Risk, Two Studies Conclude

By Cat Lazaroff

WASHINGTON, DC, September 5, 2000 (ENS) - Two new studies - one by an environmental group, one by a Congressional research group - have concluded that logging in U.S. national forests does not protect them against devastating forest fires. In fact, logging activities often increase a forest's fire risk, the studies show.

Wildfires burn millions of acres in national forests each year "The acres burned in any particular year appear to be at most weakly related to the volume of timber harvested," according to a report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), a bipartisan research group which analyzes federal policies for Congress.

The report was released Thursday by Oregon Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat, who requested the study after Republican lawmakers tried to blame this year's catastrophic fire season - the worst in the western U.S. in 50 years - on federal policies that reduce commercial logging in national forests.

"My sense is that this is a problem that cries out for an examination that goes far deeper than the next election," said Wyden.

"Timber harvesting removes the relatively large diameter wood that can be converted into wood products, but leaves behind the small material, especially twigs and needles," wrote Ross Gorte, author of the CRS report. "The concentration of these 'fine fuels' on the forest floor increases the rate of spread of wildfires."

Since 1989, logging in national forests has been cut by more than 75 percent. The CRS report examines logging levels and fire activity for the past 20 years.

Critics of the report said it is inconclusive regarding the contributions of logging to fire risk. The study found that two of the four worst fire years - 1987 and 1988 - coincided with some of the highest timber harvest years of the last two decades.

The timber industry and some Western lawmakers argue that some logging is needed to protect homes and property, like those destroyed by the Hi Meadow fire in Colorado (Photo courtesy Federal Emergency Management Agency)

In 1987, almost 12.7 billion board feet of timber was harvested from 192 million acres of national forest lands. Another 12.6 billion board feet was harvested in 1988.

But in two other high fire years - 1994 and 1996 - timber harvests were low. The report does not look at the year 2000.

"Once this year is factored in, I think you'll see what we've been saying all along - if there is more wood in a forest, there is a stronger possibility of a fire there," said Derek Jumper, spokesperson for the American Forest and Paper Association. "As bad as this

year has been, it will probably pale in comparison to future wildfire seasons," if timber harvests continue to be cut, Jumper said.

American Forest and Paper, one of the timber industry's largest groups, supports tree thinning to prevent wildfire from racing through stands of trees by jumping from crown to crown. The industry has pushed for thinning to be included in a new U.S. Forest Service fire management plan for wilderness areas, scheduled to be released next week.

The Northwest Forestry Association (NFA), an industry group, blames drought, hurricanes, invasive insects and diseases for leaving stands of vulnerable dead and dying trees - and federal policy for preventing "salvage logging" that could clear these firetraps from national forests.

Forest thinning at the Fort Valley timber sale in northern Arizona has left scattered trees surrounded by barren ground "Current well-intentioned but misguided regulations require exhaustive environmental documentation, delaying harvests of diseased or burned timber indefinitely," says an NFA policy paper on logging and wildfire. "As such, usable salvage timber wastefully rots away, resulting in lost government income from potential sales and economic privation for local communities."

But a report released today by the Pacific Biodiversity Institute, an environmental coalition, counters arguments by the timber industry and some lawmakers that logging is needed to reduce fire risk.

The "Assessment of Summer 2000 Wildfires in Western United States in Relationship to Landscape History, Current Landscape Condition and Land Ownership" analyzes the location, size, land ownership, forest type and management history of five of this year's largest fires. It also reviews regional fire patterns over the last century.

The Pacific Biodiversity Institute's report shows:

Only 31 percent of the acreage burned was on National Forest land.

Much of the land burned was grasslands, juniper woodlands and other non-forest areas.

Most of the forested area which burned was managed timberland which had already been logged, not pristine old growth.

Just 38 percent of the acres burned were in roadless or wilderness areas targeted by the timber industry as among those most at risk for wildfires.

The Pacific Biodiversity Institute study also supports arguments that wildfire is a natural process, not a danger to be countered. Much of the burning documented in the study occurred in forests where intense fire is natural, such as lodgepole pine forests. These ecosystems are prone to periodic fires that wipe out entire stands of trees, the Institute says.

Fires sparked by lightning are a natural part of forest life, many environmentalists argue (Photo courtesy National Interagency Fire Center)

The 6.4 million acres burned this year are well below the century's average, the report says. From 1916 to 1999, an average of 13.9 million acres has burned each year.

Analysis of five of this year's largest fires confirmed the long term trends for the American West: 36 percent of area was non-forested, 57 percent was in naturally high intensity burn forest types, and just eight percent occurred in naturally cool burning forest types like ponderosa pine. Most of the acres were in roaded, managed forests.