



“Unless we get some rain soon, we are in for a very long and dangerous fire season.” That was the assessment delivered by Chris Cline, Oregon Department of Forestry District Forester for the South Cascade District, to Springfield City Club on June 6. As people have no doubt noted, we have had no measurable rain since then and, in fact, fire season restrictions go into effect at midnight on June 17.

While Mr. Cline was careful to avoid engaging in the ongoing political debate about climate change, he was very clear in one respect. Since 2103 something major is changing in weather and it has adversely affected forest health. Before 2013 the average acres burned in the State and private lands managed by ODF was about 9,700. Now, Cline says, it is up to about 104,000 acres. Even that explosive increase may understate the extent of the problem, however. His calculations relate only to the approximately 15 million acres of State and private land managed by ODF. There is an equivalent amount of acreage managed by the federal government. Since about 85 percent of the acres burned are on federally managed land, and not counted in that estimate, the total acreage burned is well over one million.

With that growth in acres burned has come a massive increase in cost. Where ODF spent about \$5 million annually on fire suppression, it is now up to \$100 million. Here again, the numbers understate the impact, because of Oregon’s unique system, where private landowners must cover 50 percent of fire suppression costs. On federal lands, and in other states, all the cost is borne by the public – the taxpayers.

This year’s fire danger will, he believes, by the middle of summer, envelope the entire west coast of the United States. What drives fire danger? Mr. Cline pointed to three things: weather, topography and fuels. While topography changes little, weather, he said is the most fluid and is also a major factor in the changing composition of fuels, which are now dryer than at times in the past. “Dry weather,” he said, “means dry fuels.” In the 2017-18 water year (water years begin in October) rainfall was 67 percent of average resulting in a deficit of over 15 inches. In the current year the State is currently at only 77 percent of average, which compounds the risk created by the dry 2017-18 water year. The outlook he said, is start. Projections for the summer are higher to extremely high temperatures, and average, to below average precipitation.

Cline said the process of firefighting has changed little in his 32 years. ODF still uses a “militia” approach, calling out all hands and equipment when a fire erupts, rather than maintaining an expensive inventory of men and equipment. Helicopters and aircraft are rented, logging employees and firefighters from other jurisdictions, as well as professional land fire companies, provide the manpower. One new addition, he said, is the use of drones. They are particularly helpful in locating spot fires and identifying particularly dangerous spots in an existing fire. Now, however, the drone operator must be a licensed pilot and a second licensed pilot must be employed as an observer. He said that as more experience is gained using drones, it may even be possible to eliminate the use of manned aircraft to observe and track fires.

The impacts of fire in the forest go well beyond just acres burned and cost of suppression, he said. The polluting impact of smoke cannot be ignored and, he said, some environmental policies make that impact even worse. While ODF typically cleans up fuels left on the forest floor after a fire, federal policies may make that impossible. Restrictions on controlled burning to preserve air quality also mean that when fires erupt, there is too much fuel left on the forest floor, resulting in larger fires and more smoke. Restrictions on access also play a role. While

federal lands have an extensive network of roadbeds, restrictions on maintenance and use mean that those lands are more inaccessible than lands managed by ODF. As a result, more wilderness lands burn because firefighters cannot access them while ODF can access most private lands because landowners built logging roads through their land.

Fires prevention, Cline said, is a much more efficient method of dealing with fire than suppression. But the major methods of dealing with prevention are education – giving information to the public about fire danger and precautions and giving notice about restrictions on use of land to prevent fires from starting. One tool that is sharply restricted is the use of controlled burns to eliminate dry fuels and keep the forest floor clean. Both difficulty in access and public demands for smoke reduction or elimination pose challenges, but the main challenge is financial. There simply isn't enough funding to pay for both prevention and suppression and, because firefighting is so critical to saving lives and property, it gets the spending priority, leaving little to fund more active prevention like forest management and fuel removal.

