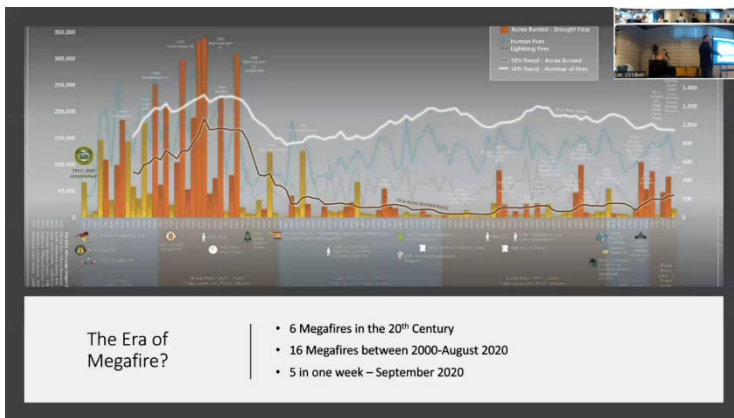


Fire has been an ever-present fact in Oregon forests, according to Kyle Williams, a forester and wildlands firefighter with the Oregon Forest Industries Council. The issue is not how can we end it, but rather how can we manage forestlands so that it does not devastate the population of Oregon and can continue to provide a vital economic resource.



While it seems that we have had many more devastating fires recently, Mr. Williams said that historically, that is not the case. In the early 20th century Oregon experiences “Mega-fires” -- those that consume more than 100,000 acres, about every other year. That ended in the 1940s when mechanical harvesting accelerated. A major concern is that about 30 years ago harvesting was cut back dramatically. Since then, it seems these mega-fires have returned, with 16 in the past two decades.

Since the 1990’s there have been two diametrically opposed views advance on forest management. One the one hand, some say the solution is to harden our communities against fire and let the forests burn. The other view is that we should log aggressively and remove much of the forests to prevent fires. Neither view makes sense, Mr. Williams said.

With respect to “letting nature take its course,” Mr. Williams pointed to three fatal flaws: 1) in the ancient past, there were few people in Oregon; now 4.1 million are affected by fire and smoke; 2) whether or not one believes in man-caused climate change, Oregon is getting warmer, meaning fuels are drier and more susceptible to large scale burning; and 3) after over 30 years of not managing the forests, they are much more likely to experience large fires that in ancient times when fire was frequent enough to prevent such a huge buildup of fuels.

The other extreme – logging everything, is simply unacceptable for a whole host of reasons, especially what it does to the natural environment which makes Oregon so attractive to residents.

Mr. Williams argues that there is a middle ground a combination of active management (which includes thinning but not clear cutting and maintaining road access to the forest both for industry and for firefighting), coupled with protecting sensitive species and hardening communities to reduce damage when fires occur.

The history of Oregon forest management points out the wisdom of a middle approach, Mr. Williams said. About equal quantities of forestland are management by the federal government and by the Oregon Department of Forestry. The federal lands are not actively managed now, while the ODF managed lands, much of which is in private ownership are still actively managed and logged, at

about the same levels as historically. Even though the amount of land managed is roughly the same, and the two land types experience roughly the same number of fires, the federal lands experience almost three times the number of acres burned as do the ODF managed lands.

In response to a question, Mr. Williams said that even active management has many variations. He agreed that management of a natural forest should be different than management of planned for harvest tree plantations, although he said that the concerns often expressed about monoculture environments – where only one true type of tree is replanted in a logged area are not accurate. He also urged caution in developing habitat conservation plans. It is difficult to achieve the right balance between protecting the forest asset, the people of Oregon and the various species whose lives are tied to some specific habitat features.

Where are our fires happening? And why?

