

Controlled burns are “an ounce of prevention”

Controlled burns reduce fire danger to firefighters, residents, homes, and nature, and release a fraction of the smoke that severe summer wildfires do.

Severe wildfire is a real and growing threat to communities around the West, where lives, homes, and businesses were lost again this summer. Here in the Rogue Valley, we suffered through seven weeks of smoky air, health effects, canceled activities and modified summer plans.



Our summer of smoke raises the questions: What brought our forests to their current unhealthy conditions and what can we do to prevent future catastrophic fires?

Two sides of fire

For centuries, frequent mild fires shaped, cleared and maintained our forests, explains Dr. Kerry Metlen, a forest ecologist with The Nature Conservancy. “Though well-intentioned, attempting to put out all fires created unnaturally dense forests that put our water, air and communities at higher risk from abnormally severe wildfire,” he said. “Add this factor to increasing construction in wildfire-prone areas, loss of older forests, a warming climate and lack of preparation by residents, and fire impacts and smoke get worse.”

Use good fire to fight bad fire

An essential part of the solution to severe summer wildfires and suffocating smoke is more controlled burning during spring and fall, Metlen explains. Scientific studies show that fuel reduction followed by controlled burns are most effective at reducing wildfire impacts, while making firefighting safer.

“Wildfires burn more fuel per acre and emit significantly more smoke than controlled burns. The recorded smoke concentration, duration and cumulative impacts on people from wildfire vastly exceeds smoke from planned, controlled

burning,” said Rick Graw, a U.S. Forest Service Regional Air Quality Program Manager, who compiles smoke data from Oregon and Washington each year.

Fire is being put to work for community benefit in many locations in the mild seasons. According to Chris Chambers, Ashland Fire & Rescue Forest Division Chief, professional teams safely use controlled burns to reduce the potential for severe summer wildfires.

“Reducing fire danger by cutting small trees and brush, followed by planned, controlled burns during favorable weather, we get to choose how the fire behaves and where the majority of the smoke goes,” says Chambers. “Fuel reduction and controlled burns set the stage for a safer community and fire resilient landscapes.”

Partners on the Ashland Forest Resiliency Project and other forest

managers all work within Oregon State regulations and procedures to minimize smoke impacts on communities, while accomplishing good for the long term.

So when you see controlled burns during the cool time of year, know that people are working for healthier forests and community today and for future generations. ■

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