Logging myths fuel legislation

The timber industry and its advocates continue to promote a number of myths designed to garner public support for increased logging. These myths are being repeated by many in Congress, including Idaho’s delegation, who are supporting new legislation that would weaken environmental protections, reduce public review of the Forest Service timber sales (called variously vegetation management, forest health restoration, fuels reduction, hazard tree reduction, salvage timber sale) and significantly increase money-losing logging on public lands.

Myth: Restoration of our forests is needed to recreate historic conditions
Truth: There is growing debate about whether most forest ecosystems need any restoration. Nearly all higher elevation mixed conifer and subalpine forests grew in dense stands that tended to burn at medium to long intervals (often at intervals of hundreds of years) with large patches of mixed to high mortality so they are well within historic conditions.

Low elevation ponderosa pine forests were considered different from the moister, higher elevation forests and characterized as open and park-like, and burned by frequent low severity surface fires. However, new research concludes that many pine stands historically experienced occasional high severity stand replacement blazes and may not be significantly outside of their historic condition.

For instance, one recent review paper concluded: “whereas current attempts to ‘restore’ forests to open, low-severity fire conditions may not align with historical reference conditions in most ponderosa pine and mixed-conifer forests of western North America.”

Myth: Logging reduces large wildfires.
Truth: Large wildfires burn under extreme weather conditions. Under extreme weather, wildfires burn through, over and around clearcuts, thinned forests, and areas that have been prescribed burned. Such fires are “controlled” when the weather changes to more moderate conditions.

Logging may even increase fire spread and fire severity.

The conclusion of the Sierra Nevada report to Congress had this to say: “Timber harvest, through its effects on forest structure, local microclimate, and fuels accumulation, has increased fire severity more than any other recent human activity”

“Logged areas generally showed a strong association with increased rate of spread and flame length, thereby suggesting that tree harvesting could affect the potential fire behavior within landscapes. In general, rate of spread and flame length were positively correlated with the proportion of area logged in the sample watersheds.”

Another study done by fire ecologists at the Missoula Fire Lab concluded:” Even extensive fuel treatments may not reduce the amount of area burned over the long-term and furthermore, reduction of area burned may actually be an undesirable outcome.”
They go on to conclude: “Treating fuels to reduce fire occurrence, fire size, or amount of burned area is ultimately both futile and counter-productive.”

A new study soon to be published found that reviewed 1500 wildfires between 1984 and 2014 found that actively managed forests had the highest level of fire severity. While those forests in protected areas burned, on average, had the lowest level of fire severity. In other words, the best way to reduce severe fires is to protect the land as wilderness, not “manage” it.

Myth; Thinning national forest lands will protect homes.
Truth: One only needs to reduce the flammability within 100 feet of homes to protect them. Reducing fuels more than 100 feet beyond the home confers no additional protection. As one study concluded: “It may not be necessary or effective to treat fuels in adjacent areas in order to suppress fires before they reach homes; rather, it is the treatment of the fuels immediately proximate to the residences, and the degree to which the residential structures themselves can ignite that determine if the residences are vulnerable.”

Myth: Beetle outbreaks increases the chances of wildfire
Truth: Any number of research studies has documented that beetle outbreaks has little effect or even reduces the chance of large wildfire for a period of years. Dead trees do not burn as well as live trees with flammable resins. For example, one study concluded “we found no detectable increase in the occurrence of high-severity fires following MPB outbreaks. Dry conditions, rather than changes in fuels associated with outbreak, appear to be most limiting to the occurrence of severe fires in these forests”

Myth: Large wildfires have increased.
Truth: If you start with the middle of last century when the climate was cooler and moister—a climatic condition that reduces fire spread—one might conclude there are more large fires, but if your starting point is earlier in the century or even over the last thousand years, there is no evidence for an increase in large fires. We have a deficit of large fires, and as a consequence of the snag forest and dead wood habitat that such fires creates. For instance, a 2016 study concluded that “area burned at high severity has overall declined compared to pre-European settlement.”

Myth: Dead trees are a sign of a forest health problem
Truth: Dead trees are critical to healthy forest ecosystems. Some 250 scientists recently sent a letter to Congress affirming “snag forest habitat” are “ecological treasures comparable to old growth forests.

Unfortunately, as result of logging and other forest management, we have a deficit of dead trees in our forest ecosystems. Episodic input of dead woods results from wildfire, beetles, and disease. These natural processes help maintain forest ecosystem health.

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