

Opinion

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EDITORIALS

Reassessing megafires

They cost us even more than we thought

Big forest fires cost more than you think. Much of the damage they cause is not taken into account by the media, the agencies that fight the fires, or anyone else.

That's the principal message of a 20-page study released this week by four Oregonians with a strong interest in forest management, including coping with fire. They call their work product the "U.S. Wildfire Cost-Plus-Loss Economics Project."

Their summary explains:

"U.S. forests have been experiencing an escalating number of catastrophic-scale forest wildfires during the past 20 years. U.S. Forest Service and other local, state, federal and tribal government wildfire suppression costs have also escalated dramatically, to nearly \$2 billion a year. Preliminary research indicates that USFS suppression costs may represent only 2 to 10 percent of the total 'cost-plus-loss' damages to burned forests, however; recent public losses attributable to major forest wildfires may total \$20 billion to \$100 billion a year."

The authors note that "wildlife costs and losses are often considered in terms of suppression costs only, with relatively little attention given to related losses of timber and forage values, wildlife habitat and populations (including endangered species and their critically protected habitat), air and water quality, recreational opportunities, local economies, and other resources and amenities important to all citizens. Human lives and adverse health effects are usually not considered in terms of dollar losses at all, and tallies of domestic animal or wildlife fatalities are rarely attempted or even mentioned."

Despite its fairly dramatic conclusions, the study offers no policy argu-

mentation except for urging everyone to embrace its expanded definitions of fire effects. The authors don't take sides in the debate between those who prefer to "let it burn" and those who want to call out the jumpers at the first sign of smoke.

The information itself, of course, implicitly argues for doing more to control fires.

One of the co-authors, John Marker of Hood River, a retired Forest Service employee, notes that all members of the group are troubled by the declining health of the Northwest's public forests.

"How can you manage a forest if you can't protect it?" he asked.

But Marker said they wanted to avoid policy debates and instead hoped to "stimulate discussion that can bring more focus to the debates" over how to manage the forest.

Other members of the group, who did their work by way of the Internet and rarely saw each other, are: Greg Zybach of Molalla, Michael Dubrasic of Lebanon and Greg Brenner of Corvallis.

At the end of the paper, the authors offer 11 categories of costs and losses, which they call a "one-pager" checklist for appraising fire effects. Each effect carries a paragraph of explanation, but the categories are suppression costs; property, public health, vegetation, wildlife, water, air and atmospheric effects; soil-related effects; recreation and esthetics; energy; and heritage.

The paper will be circulating to public officials and others throughout the Northwest.

It's hard to tell what effects this study will have. But it seems likely that it will become part of the active debate over fire policy and not just languish on the shelf.

