

A Simple Goal: Eliminate Fire Regime Condition Class 3 by 2030

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Society of American Foresters

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Is there a county anywhere in the United States that isn't struggling in these hard economic times? For Joe Laurance, a member of Oregon's Douglas County Board of Commissioners, "struggling" isn't a strong enough word. According to the state's Employment Department, Douglas County's 14.2 percent unemployment rate in December was the highest in the state and far above the national rate in January of 9.7 percent. Hard times in the county are nothing new, however.

"Once upon a time, in 1988, specifically, the cut on the Umpqua National Forest was 397 million board feet," said Laurance. "The spotted owl was listed on June 26, 1990, and by 2002, the cut was four million board feet—one one-hundredth of what was once a vital part of our economy. What we have now is basically a community in collapse."

Far from throwing up his hands, Laurance has proposed a solution, not only for his county, but for many others.

"I see the economic problems of my county and my state and my nation being offset to a significant degree by harvesting our federal forests—that is, harvesting designed to protect our forests," he said.

Laurance has pitched his solution in the form of a simple policy statement that he would like to see the National Association of Counties (NACo) adopt:

NACo urges Congress to enact legislation to direct and enable federal forest management agencies to reduce Fire Regime Condition Class 3 (FRCC 3) to the standard of FRCC 1 in all federal forests by the year 2030, and to reduce FRCC 2 to the standard of FRCC 1 in all federal forests by the year 2050, through the means of active landscape scale management, fuels reduction, and immediate post-fire restoration.

Laurance, who worked for 28 years as a self-employed log hauler and has a strong grasp of forest and fire management issues, said he fears that, given re-

cent trends in wildfire extent and severity, most or all of the forests in his county will have burned by 2040. What's more, he sees federal agencies as unable to do enough about it, in part because their hands are tied by lawsuits from environmental groups.

"Unless we do something drastic, we're going to see that dreadful day come," he said. "These are not fires of the kind that the aboriginal people set. These are catastrophic fires that cook the soil, and it takes a long time for things to come back."

In a nutshell, Laurance suggests that federal forests be returned to what he calls aboriginal conditions through judicious timber harvesting and fuels reduction and kept that way through the use of active forest management, including prescribed fire that has the same effect as the fires set by the aboriginal peoples for millennia. Doing so, he said, would not only provide an economic boost to his county and others through higher employment and a share of federal timber sale receipts, but also would reduce carbon dioxide emissions, reduce the incidence of catastrophic fires and the expenditures needed to combat them, and result in healthy forests over the long term.

Laurance said hundreds of other counties are in the same boat, and some have voiced support for his proposal. He hopes NACo's board of directors will adopt the proposal at its meeting this month. Still, he readily admits that the elimination of FRCC 3 is easier said than done.

He's right about that. Congress is in no mood to tinker with forest management laws or provide significant increases in funding for land management agencies. Lawmakers might well point to the efforts already under way to reduce fire risk. Together, the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management report that they treated more than 29 million acres of federal lands from 2001 through 2008 (the figures for 2009 aren't yet available),



This stand of ponderosa pine on the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon was restored to fire regime condition class 1 through thinning, mechanical fuels reduction, and prescribed fire.

under the Healthy Forest Initiative and National Fire Plan. They might also note that many millions of additional dollars have been funneled to such work via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, including to Douglas County, as reported in "Stimulus Funding Jump-Starts Oregon Thinning Project," in the June 2009 issue of *The Forestry Source*.

But to Laurance, this isn't enough. His proposal is not merely to reduce fuels, he said, but to return forests to a pre-European contact condition, or what some call native forest or Indian forest, and keep them there.

"My fear is that, before we have a chance to change the forest, the forest will change without us through fire," he said.

Laurance's proposal may be simple. Some will call it simplistic. Either way, it deserves discussion.

Wilent is editor of *The Forestry Source*.

LETTERS

Discussion of High Grading

The recent commentary on high grading by Mike Greason stirred a number of responses. That's great! But the commentators seemed more concerned with Greason's ideas on how foresters are paid than the issue of high grading itself. I hope to stir continued interest by asking a number of questions—always looking for the why and why not—or with an implication of "please explain." Have at them:

- Is high grading good silviculture or good forestry?
- Is high grading a sound practice of sustainable forestry?
- Is high grading an issue being dealt with adequately by the SAF at any level in any state?
- Is high grading adequately covered in any forest certification system or sustainable forestry program?
- Does the SAF Mission Statement pledge sustainable forestry practices by members?
- Does the SAF Code of Ethics pledge sustainable forestry practices by members?
- Is high grading just a regional issue

of the Eastern hardwoods, or is it more widespread?

- Is high grading a simple problem with a simple solution?
- Finally, how do the issues raised above speak to the professionalism of forestry?

There are other questions that could be asked, especially if the related area of low forester market penetration on family forests was included (e.g., only 22 percent of nonindustrial private owners seek advice from professional foresters before harvesting timber).

I hope these questions bring thoughtful comments.

Jim Coufal
 Cazenovia, New York

Coufal served as SAF president in 1999.

Tradition and Education

I read with interest the From the Leadership column by my old friend, SAF Vice-President Roger Dziengeleski, in the February 2010 issue of *The Forestry Source*. Dziengeleski begins the piece by writing about forestry being steeped in tradition and that is true, perhaps too much so. He also states, "Our educational sys-

tem is rooted in the past, and some (but definitely not all) of the science that is taught and that we use comes from eras gone by."

Prior to my retirement in 2005 I had the privilege of being head of three of the country's forestry and natural resource schools. I also served two terms on the SAF Committee on Accreditation, including one as its chair. I know from those experiences that most forestry programs in the United States today have become quite progressive and are offering students courses and options that include all aspects of the ecosystem. My last stop was at Louisiana State University. During my more than five years there, the school changed its name and instituted a new degree program in natural resource ecology and management. In addition, new areas of concentration were developed that include ecological restoration, conservation biology, and wetlands science. Existing courses in forestry, wildlife, fisheries, and aquaculture were modernized. This is happening all across this country. Indeed, schools are rapidly moving well beyond the way forestry has traditionally been taught.

Putting on my Accreditation Committee hat for a moment, I would say that

("Letters" continued on page 3)