

Preparing ourselves for wildfire

By **DAVID POWELL**
Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition

Western forests are destined to burn. Before Euro-American emigrants arrived, Blue Mountain forests burned every five to 20 years when lightning or Native Americans ignited fires.

These fires moved swiftly across the forest floor, conserving the large trees while consuming needles, twigs, downed wood, and small seedlings. After settlement, we began putting fires out. We did this job quite well for decades, and forests are now choked with woody debris and a flammable layer of small trees.

Now, fires burn hotter, faster and get bigger than ever before. Since 2000, about 100 million acres of forest and range in the West have burned. As a result, Oregon and other western states set new records for their largest forest fire (Oregon's record is the 2002 Biscuit Fire, which totaled about half a million acres). Large burns like the Biscuit Fire are called megafires.

Paul Hessburg, a research ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service in Wenatchee, Washington, will visit Pendleton on Sept. 20 to present a multimedia program called "Era of Megafires." Hessburg explains that the program addresses how we got here, what's at stake, and what each of us can do.

Hessburg has been publishing scientific work in leading journals for more than 30 years. Recently, after large fires ravaged favorite forests near his home in central Washington, he felt a need to take his findings directly to the public. The Carlton Complex megafire burned 256,000 acres in 2014 (largest fire in Washington history), and the Sleepy Hollow Fire a year later consumed 30 homes in his hometown of Wenatchee.

"It is heart wrenching when you know people who lost their homes in these fires," Hessburg said. "Especially when you know the loss is avoidable."

Hessburg also notes that "modeling indicates we can expect a doubling or tripling of annual area burned by mid-century." This estimate is supported by a just-completed national climate assessment — it found that average temperatures in the United States have risen dramatically since 1980, and recent decades have been the warmest of the past 1,500 years. Fire seasons clearly reflect recent temperature changes, as they now stretch 4 to 8 weeks longer than just 50 years ago.

What will be, they say, will be. But this is not true when it comes to fire risk.

"We have tools that can reverse the trend," said Hessburg. Thinning, prescribed fire, and managed wildfire are effective tools for mitigating fire risk.

Thinning mimics historical processes by removing the small trees that fire would have killed. It reduces "ladder fuel" — small understory trees that carry fire from the ground

Era of Megafires

September 20, 6:30 p.m.
Vert Auditorium, Pendleton
Free, but please register at
www.eom2017pdt.eventbrite.com

up to the treetops, where it races from one tree to another.

After thinning, prescribed fire is used in spring or fall when it is safe to do so. Prescribed fire reduces fine fuels (needles, twigs, downed wood) for 10 years or more, providing a safer environment for both the forest and firefighters.

Modeling forecasts 2 or 3 times more wildfire in the future than now, so we could choose to let some fires burn as a "managed wildfire" strategy.

Often used for large tracts of public land, managed wildfire is seldom practical for small, private-land parcels. It is a reasonable approach when weather and fuel conditions are ideal, particularly for wilderness and roadless areas where wildfires can be

"herded" away from human developments.

Any use of prescribed fire or managed wildfire inevitably raises concerns about smoke. Smoke is a big issue, especially for those with asthma or respiratory difficulties. During this past summer, Pendleton and most of the interior Northwest dealt with many days of smoky conditions caused by wildfires in British Columbia and Montana.

When compared to this summer's wildfire smoke from western Canada, prescribed fire smoke is short-lived and affects limited areas. In August 2016, the Weigh Station Fire burned near Interstate 84 between Pendleton and La Grande. It closed the interstate for a time and threatened many structures. And a year earlier in August 2015, the Canyon Creek Fire near John Day destroyed 43 homes and nearly 100 other structures, while burning 110,000 acres of land. 300 people were evacuated because of this megafire.

During the presentation, Hessburg describes how Blue Mountain residents can use FireWise concepts (firewise.org) to prepare their cabins, homes, and properties for an event like the Weigh Station or Canyon Creek fire. The Era of Megafires program uses compelling videos prepared by a documentary film company to cover these and many other topics. Hessburg skillfully weaves the multimedia elements together, crafting both a cautionary tale and a call to action.

Yes, western forests are destined to burn. We can't prevent summer thunderstorms and lightning-caused fires. But we can learn to live with wildfires in a better way. As the Era of Megafires program rightly notes, the choice is ours.

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David C. Powell is vice chair of the Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition, a co-sponsor of the "Era of Megafires" showing in Pendleton.

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