# What to do about 'megafires'

## Presentation highlights risks, actions to fight growing threat

**By GEORGE PLAVEN**
*East Oregonian*

Wildfires are getting bigger and hotter across the West, threatening communities and causing billions of dollars in damage as forests become more cluttered and prone to disease.

That's according to a presentation by Paul Hessburg, research landscape ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service, documenting how the landscape has changed and what effect humans are having on fire behavior.

**Hessburg**

Hessburg's talk, titled "Era of Megafires," is equal parts cautionary tale and call to action, mixing decades worth of research with short video clips to show how and why large fires erupt, the devastation they cause and what

Courtesy of Jennifer Walmsley

**The Canyon Creek Complex wildfire is seen from downtown John Day, during the dark days before hundreds of firefighters wrestled it into submission. That did not happen, however, until 44 homes were lost to the fire.**

# FIRE: Forest Service spent $2.1 billion fighting fires throughout the region

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people must do to contain them in the future.

On Wednesday, Hessburg spoke before a mostly full house at Maxey Hall on the campus of Whitman College in Walla Walla. The community had its own brush with the destructive Blue Creek Fire in July 2015 that burned 6,000 acres, 12 structures and nearly crept into the Mill Creek watershed.

While the prospect of megafires is a scary thought, Hessburg said it wasn't his goal to make people afraid — quite the opposite, actually.

"I want you to feel more powerful," Hessburg said. "We need to work toward making our forests fire-resilient again."

Hessburg, who lives in Wenatchee, Washington, relayed the experience of his own hometown battling the massive Sleepy Hollow blaze during the same 2015 wildlife season. That fire morphed into a nearly 3,000-acre inferno that destroyed 29 homes and three commercial businesses.

Less than two months later, Eastern Oregon would face a trio of monstrous fires: the Canyon Creek Complex near John Day, Grizzly Bear Complex outside of Troy and Cornet-Windy Ridge Fire in Baker County. All together, those fires would torch nearly 300,000 acres, and another 43 homes would burn in Canyon Creek.

The Forest Service spent $2.1 billion fighting fires throughout the region, though Hessburg said the toll was much higher in reality. Suppression costs are just one piece of the puzzle, he said. Combined with rebuilding infrastructure, lost property values and business revenue, the actual cost figures to be more than $50 billion.

"As taxpayers, this should concern all of us," he said.

Getting to the root of modern megafires requires a look back at history. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt and forester Gifford Pinchot created the Forest Service. Five years later, the Great Fire of 1910 burned roughly 3 million acres across northeast Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana.

From then on, Hessburg said the Forest Service pledged to fight fires at all costs. It took about 25 years for the agency to get really good at fire suppression, and by 1934 the agency adopted the so-called "10 a.m. policy," which ordered every fire be put out by 10 a.m. the day after it was first reported.

The result, Hessburg said, has been decades of fire exclusion on the landscape, which has changed the composition of the forests to overly dense and crowded with vegetation. Past logging practices also removed older and larger trees from the forest, encouraging the growth of less fire-resilient species.

"This is when our forests started to become sick and unhealthy," Hessburg said.

Comparing historical and current photos, Hessburg pointed out how forests used to be a patchy mosaic of large trees and open grassy meadows, which kept fires low to the ground and low in intensity. Now forest fires have much more fuel to consume and climb their way up into the canopy of tree stands.

Climate change is also making summers warmer and extending fire season by months, Hessburg said, turning the forests into a powder keg. By 2050, data show the West could experience two or three times as much fire as it does now.

"Even the most conservative forecasts are pretty darn dire," he said.

Fire suppression alone is an incomplete solution, Hessburg said. What needs to happen is large-scale rehabilitation of the forests and rangeland using a variety of management tools.

It will be an immense job, as Oregon and Washington have a combined 11.6 million acres in need of treatment to restore better fire behavior.

The first and perhaps most important step, Hessburg said, is restoring fire to its natural role on the landscape. He pointed to things like prescribed burns and managed wildfires, where a naturally caused, low-intensity blaze is allowed to run its natural course.

Fire is the most important natural process for forests in the West, Hessburg said. Not only does it increase future resilience, but some species depend on wildfire for survival — lodgepole pine cones will only open after a fire, while certain types of birds make their habitat in burned snags.

Mechanical thinning can also be a valuable tool if it's done in the right places, Hessburg said. The timber industry has a role to play, using the wood to make products such as lumber, chips and biomass for power plants.

Homeowners who live in the woods also need to consider thinning around their homes in an effort to keep their properties safer, Hessburg said. The general rule of thumb is a 30-foot buffer of defensible space.

"Continued development in the wildland-urban interface is putting a whole lot of stress on our firefighters," Hessburg said.

The Oregon Department of Forestry does have a program to work with homeowners on "firescaping" projects, and reimburse up to 75 percent of the cost.

By being proactive instead of reactive, Hessburg said local agencies and communities can help reduce the trend of megafires and restore forest and rangeland health.

"It's up to us," he said. "The question is, how do you want your fire and your smoke?"