

Saving Our Forests

Trees are our most valuable and beautiful resource. They're renewable and sustainable. They protect and feed our wildlife. They provide us with lumber for our homes. They clean the air we breathe.

They're our connection to the natural world.

Our forests are in trouble

But our Ponderosa pine forests are in peril.

Ponderosa stands are burning, dying and rotting at an alarming rate in eastern Oregon, and throughout the inland west.

Every forest is unique, yet we're treating them all the same. This one-size-fits-all approach to natural resource management simply doesn't work.

When early settlers came to these forests, they found big, widely spaced trees with very little understory. In fact, the forests were so open and park-like you could easily travel through them in a horse and buggy.

Today these same forests are overcrowded, with small weak trees, struggling in thick undergrowth. They're defenseless against fire, insects and disease.

Entire ecosystems are changing. Juniper is spreading beyond its natural range, creating a less-diverse environment for plants and animals alike. At the same time, quaking aspen stands are disappearing. And with them go the fawning grounds for mule deer and calving beds for elk.

As the environment has declined so have our rural communities, and with them the entire economy of the region.

Timber harvests on federal forests have fallen 92 percent in the last twenty years. Mills can no longer find the raw materials they need to stay in business. Over 50 lumber mills have been forced to close in eastern Oregon. Only 15 remain in operation today.

International competition, the economy, litigation and mechanization have added to the problem. When mills can't get timber, jobs are lost. Tax revenues decline. Schools and businesses close. Rural populations dwindle. Whole communities suffer.

How did we get here?

Before settlement, lightning-caused fires burned through Ponderosa stands every 10 to 20 years. This kept the understory down and young trees from becoming too crowded. Fires stayed low to the ground and rarely got hot enough to damage the naturally fire-resistant bark of healthy mature trees.

At the beginning of the 20th century, things began to change. Public opinion and government policy shifted. Smokey the Bear was born and fires were put out as soon as they started. The understory and overcrowding that had been held in check began to build up, so that when fire did break out, it was bad. Gone were the natural cycles that had kept Ponderosa forests healthy.

In the middle of the century, heavy logging of large old-growth Ponderosa left unnaturally dense stands of young fir trees in their place. Thousands of miles of logging roads were built, disrupting wildlife migration, causing weeds to spread, and creating erosion problems.

At one time, natural predators kept wild grazing animals in check. With settlement, many predators were killed or displaced from their natural ranges. The domestic livestock industry grew. Native vegetation suffered from the impact of so many animals. Invasive plants began to take over.

In recent years, public reaction to past practices has caused the federal government to place large areas off limits to logging, thinning, and road building. Lawsuits have further restricted what we can do for our national forests.

For too long our forests have been controlled by the whim of public opinion. From hands-on fire suppression to hands-off passive management, our forests have suffered.

What Can We Do?

Conditions in over-stocked Ponderosa forests are severe, but it's not too late to save them. Active management is needed.

Treatments like thinning and prescribed burning can help prevent catastrophic wildfire, and protect trees from drought, disease and insects. Scientists say that climate change is increasing the urgency in which we need to take action.

In addition to removing small trees and underbrush, some large trees will also need to be harvested. In trying to protect our old growth forests, we have actually put them at greater risk. Home to salmon and other endangered species, these forests need active management to restore balance and assure the survival of all that we've worked so hard to protect.

We also need to improve stream conditions, preserve wildlife habitat, remove invasive plants and decommission unnecessary roads.

These projects will encourage new restoration-based businesses and help revitalize the traditional timber industry.

Just as timber is important to these communities, so is the livestock industry. Ranching provides food and fiber, meaningful employment and wide open spaces. It feeds the economy and forms the culture of the American West.

The viability of many ranches is dependent on access to public lands. Private lands, in turn, support stream and watershed functions. They provide important habitat for migratory wildlife, and often support valuable ecosystems not found on adjacent public lands.

Ranchers play a significant role in improving the health and productivity of both rangelands and forests.

The Time Is Now

We must find common ground.

Whether for recreation, wildlife habitat, cattle and timber production - or simply for the preservation of wild and scenic places – loggers, environmentalists, ranchers, citizens and community groups must come together to
Save Our Forests!