

Environmentalitis* & Catastrophic Wildfires: Unintended Consequences

Part 2. 1996-2025



Fig. 1. Tumblebug Reburn. This area of the 2025 Emigrant Fire was initially burned in the 2009 Tumblebug Fire and never salvage logged or reforested. This is located southwest of McGowan Mountain peak on the Echo Creek headwaters. June 8, 2026 photo by Bob Zybach.

“It was the worst year of my life.” Richard Stem was the Timber and Planning Staff Officer of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest when he was promoted to Deputy Supervisor on the Willamette National Forest (NF) in March, 1996.

The previous month, in February, the first of the infamous “1996 Floods” had struck the Willamette, doing great damage to the Forest and to many of the rural businesses and communities that it adjoined; the Warner Creek dispute was a continuing and escalating confrontation; the Clinton administration officially decided to not allow salvage of burned trees; unprecedented widespread Middle Fork Willamette wildfires (including the Charlton) took place in late summer; the Oakridge Ranger Station was burned by environmental activists in the fall; and a Blue River Ranger District employee was kidnapped and raped over a three-day period the following year.

One of Stem’s most immediate problems upon his arrival

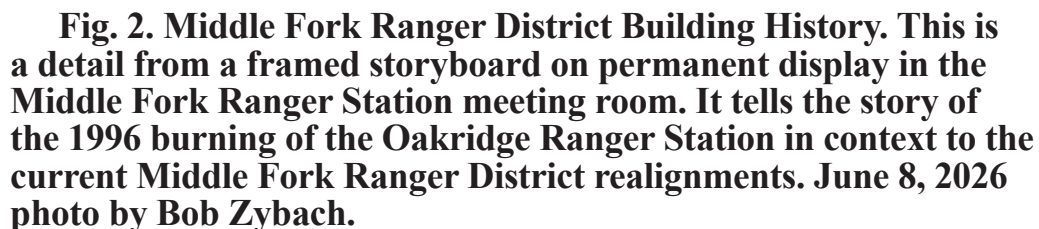
was the political, legal, and physical barriers that had been placed to stop the sale and harvest of trees killed during the Warner Creek Fire.

By that time the Warner Creek actions had become the catalyst for a series of regional and national anti-logging protests and litigation that have continued to the present time. The debate had become so public and heated that both Stem and Willamette NF Supervisor Darrel Kenops had received threats to themselves and their families to the point that the FBI had become involved.

Warner Creek had been started by an arsonist on October 10, 1991 and burned 9,000 acres while killing an estimated 180 million board feet (mmbf) of timber by the time it was extinguished on October 30. Suppression costs were \$10 million.

The fire area occurred entirely within an area designated as a planned Habitat Conservation Area (“HCA”), to be man-

An appeal to Hogan's ruling was also dismissed, but a hearing on the dismissal was scheduled for February 1996. This was a month before Stem's arrival, but activists had already taken another approach. Dozens of Eugene protesters, working under the banner of Earth First! and supported by students and professors at the University of Oregon Environmental Law Clinic, had set up a long-term encampment and blockade on Forest Service Road 2408, the only access to the sale's otherwise roadless area.



On July 29, USDA and the Forest Service announced a tentative settlement with Thomas Creek Lumber & Log Co., canceling the sale of .52 mmbf. Kenops and Stem had strongly supported this sale, and others, but were over-ruled by the administration in DC. Victorious protesters in Eugene chanted to the public that they had “won” and that “not one black stick” would be logged.

When activists tried the same action as the Warner Creek blockade on a timber sale in the Detroit Ranger District, they were taken out and arrested the same day. Shortly after, Stem issued a second closure on Warner Creek and on August 16 Forest Service law enforcement officials began evicting and arresting protesters on Road 2408 and bulldozed the blockades and trenches.

The history of these actions and responses are covered in more detail in Part I of this article and are well-documented in the 1999 video, "Pickaxe," Kera Abraham's 2006 5-part series in Eugene Weekly, "Flames of Dissent," and in Oregon Public Broadcasting's ("OPB") 2019 7-part series, "Timber Wars."

On August 23, lightning started the Charlton Fire and 10,000 acres burned in five days, killing more than 95% of the trees and thousands of wildlife; and in October the Oakridge Ranger Station was burned to the ground by environmental activists from Eugene. 1996 was a year to remember.

The Ranger Station Fire

Oakridge Ranger District Forester Tim Bailey was preparing to go to work on the morning of October 30, 1996 when he got a phone call from a friend asking if he had heard about the fire at the Oakridge Ranger Station. Bailey said "no," and assumed some damage had been done to the building.

When he arrived at work at 7:00 AM he was shocked to see the entire building had burned to the ground. More than 100 people, including 90 full-time employees, were gathered at the front parking lot because the back lot and side lots were filled with fire trucks and firefighting equipment. People were mostly standing around in stunned silence; some were sobbing. They were informed they were being placed on paid leave until they could be reassigned, and folks began drifting away in the next few hours.

Stem had been called by Forest Service Law Enforcement at 2:45 AM and had been on-site since 3:30. He spent the next 24 hours working with Staff and the 90 displaced workers and began making the arrangements to transfer them to the Rigdon Ranger District while the Station was being rebuilt.

Bailey remembers his four years at Rigdon while the new Station was being constructed as a generally positive, pleasant, and informative experience; an opportunity to meet some "great new friends" and co-workers and to become familiar



Fig. 3. Tim Bailey with symbolic souvenirs of the 1996 Oakridge Ranger Station fire. The small jar contains a sample of the ashes that remained of the Warner Fire Recovery Project Analysis File. Those documents filled seven standard file cabinet drawers and were reduced to a trash bag of ashes. Bailey had served as Interdisciplinary Team leader and Silviculturist on the project and was responsible for responding to public comments on the decisions and appeals. As a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) specialist, he was also responsible for maintaining the official Administrative Record. The partially melted "basal area prism" in his right hand had been in his desk drawer before the fire. The tool had been used to measure the basal area of the tree stems in a forest stand as a part of routine data collection with "stand exam plots." May 14, 2026 photo by Bob Zybach.

with a part of the Willamette he previously knew little about -- and where he first learned about Jim's Creek.

The burning of Oakridge Ranger Station was the catalyst and signature action that led directly to a national series of destructive arson fires, all being set by an anonymous group of environmental activists that first formed in Eugene as a splinter group from Earth First! They called themselves "The Family" and their new organization the Earth Liberation Front, or "ELF."

ELF had no formal membership or regular meetings. Anyone could be an "Elf," so long as they agreed to abide by three principles: to inflict maximum economic damage on anyone profiting off "the destruction of the natural world"; to educate the public about "environmental atrocities"; and to take precautions against injuring living creatures, including people.

In 2004, the FBI in Portland, Oregon started "Operation Backfire" to investigate the acts of arson and other forms of

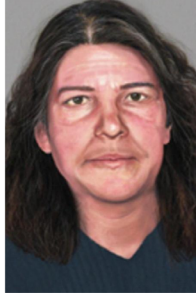


WANTED BY THE FBI

JOSEPHINE SUNSHINE OVERAKER

Conspiracy to Commit Arson of United States Government Property and of Property Used in Interstate Commerce; Conspiracy to Commit Arson and Destruction of an Energy Facility; Attempted Arson of a Building; Arson of a Vehicle; Arson of a Building; Destruction of an Energy Facility



Tattoo of bird on back Photograph Age Progressed to 41 Years Old

DESCRIPTION	
Aliases: Lisa Rachelle Quintana, Lisa R. Quintana, Maria Rachelle Quintana, Maria Quintana, "Osha", "Jo", "China", "Josie", "Mo"	
Date(s) of Birth Used: November 19, 1974; October 4, 1971; November 4, 1971	Place of Birth: Canada
Hair: Brown	Eyes: Brown
Height: 5'3"	Weight: 130 pounds
Sex: Female	Race: White
Occupation: Overaker may seek employment as a firefighter, a midwife, a sheep tender, or a masseuse.	Nationality: Canadian
Scars and Marks: Overaker has a large unknown tattoo on her upper left arm and a very large bird tattoo stretching from her right upper arm across her upper back. She has scars on her left ankle, right ankle, right calf, and right thigh.	NCIC: W105842105 / W258514859

REWARD

The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the arrest of Josephine Sunshine Overaker.

REMARKS

Overaker is fluent in Spanish. She is known to use illegal narcotics. Overaker may have a light facial moustache. She was a vegan and may still be. Overaker is an American citizen.

CAUTION

On January 19, 2006, a federal grand jury in Eugene, Oregon, indicted Josephine Sunshine Overaker on multiple charges related to her alleged role in a domestic terrorism cell. Overaker was charged with two conspiracy violations related to seventeen incidents, five counts of arson, one count of attempted arson, and one count of destruction of an energy facility. These crimes occurred in Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, and Wyoming, and date back to 1996. Many of the crimes she is accused of participating in were claimed to be committed by the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) or the Animal Liberation Front (ALF).

driver, got 13 years.

This story has been told before, most notably in Marshall Curry's Academy Award-nominated documentary film, "If a Tree Falls: A Story of the Earth Liberation Front," which profiled several of the co-conspirators, including Ferguson, Overaker, and Tubbs.

Journalist Matthew Wolfe is offering a more comprehensive look of the same story with his just-published new book, "Fires in the Night: The Earth Liberation Front, the FBI, and a Secret History of Eco-Sabotage."

1996-2022 Charlton Reburn

Stem recalled the 1996 fire season as one of the worst he had ever dealt with. At one point he had three "Incident Type 2" firefighting crews on separate fires in the Middle Fork Ranger District alone.

A Type 2 Incident refers to a large-scale and complex emergency that exceeds local resources and requires regional or national assistance. Each group is typically comprised of an 18-20 person crew that constructs firelines with hand tools and chain saws, lay hoses, and performs final "mop-up" duties to fully extinguish a fire. They are usually under the direction of a high-level Incident Management Team ("IMT"), typically operate over several operational periods, and require an Incident Action Plan ("IAP").

On August 23, 1996 lightning struck just north of Waldo Lake and burned 10,400 acres in five days; almost entirely in the Waldo Lake Wilderness and the adjacent "Inventoried Roadless Area," both of which had been

created by H.R. 1149, the "Oregon Wilderness Act of 1984." The fire was named for Charlton Butte, which was partly burned, and extended southward nearly to Charlton Lake.

Because the event took place in a Wilderness and a designated Roadless Area, little was done to extinguish the fire and no salvage or reforestation took place. More than 95% of the trees were killed and very little natural regeneration had taken place in the subsequent 25 years. The new fuels -- principally snags and logs created by the fire -- were therefor left in place with the apparent assumption that they would help build the soil for the "natural" regeneration of the forest.

The significant amount of damage to the soil, the widespread deadly air pollution, and the catastrophic loss of local wildlife populations when the area burned again during the 2022 Cedar Creek Fire has been discussed and documented in two earlier articles in this series: the Winter 2025 issue of Oregon Fish and Wildlife Journal, "The 2022 Cedar Creek Burn & The 1897 Organic Act"; and "The 2022 Charlton Reburn:

Fig. 4. Josephine Sunshine Overaker FBI \$50,000 Reward Poster.

"domestic terrorism" that had been taking place by the "Elves" across five western states, beginning with the Oakridge fire. The FBI characterized the group as "the nation's leading domestic terrorist organization" at the time.

Six women and seven men were indicted by the FBI on 65 counts in 2005-2006 and charged with causing more than \$48 million in damages through their actions. All pled or were found guilty and sentenced from three to 13 years for their crimes.

Two of the co-conspirators, Jake Ferguson and Josephine Sunshine Overaker, had tried to burn down the Detroit Ranger Station on October 28, 1996 and failed -- so they enlisted Eugene associate Kevin Tubbs to drive them to Oakridge on the 30th, where they burned down the Oakridge Station. All three had actively participated in the Warner Creek protests and knew the location well.

Ferguson turned informant in 2005 and served no time; Overaker fled in 2001 and has never been captured, despite a \$50,000 reward being offered by the FBI; and Tubbs, the

Roadless Rules & Wildfires,” which appeared in the Winter 2026 issue.

2009-2025 Tumblebug Reburn

The 2009 Tumblebug Fire was a massive wildfire complex that burned nearly 15,000 acres of the Willamette National Forest in eastern Lane County. It was sparked by lightning on September 12 and burned for weeks, sending heavy smoke toward Eugene and across the Pacific Northwest.

Nearly 600 firefighters were working on the fire by September 21, and on September 23 the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency rated the air quality as “unhealthy” for Eugene. Satellite images showed the thick smoke being blown into British Columbia.

Long-time Eugene television reporter, Tom Adams, kept the public informed almost daily from his position with KVAL News and NBC 16, often quoting experts in the fields of air quality and health care:

“If you’re outside and have lung or heart issues, be very careful: RiverBend Hospital saw one acute asthma attack in the emergency room Wednesday . . . The smoke is so bad you can barely see the outline of the hills east of Springfield from atop Kelly Butte . . . All that smoke is driving more patients to doctors’ offices and allergy centers.”

He also reported on the physical effects of the fire: “Air quality in the Eugene/Springfield area severely worsened Wednesday as smoke and ash from forest fires in the Cascades settled into the southern Willamette Valley . . . Eugene and Springfield residents again woke up to cars covered in ash and soot from the fires.”

As with the Charlton, Tumblebug was not salvage logged or reforested, but for different reasons.

During October, as the Tumblebug was finally being



Fig. 5. Charlton Burn, 2014. This is a photo of a small wetland or ephemeral pond taken near the north shore of Waldo Lake during the Fall in 2014. Tim Bailey, Rex Storm of Associated Oregon Loggers, and USFS Forester Gary Marsh are shown in relation to the rejuvenated bear grass in the foreground, and with the massive amount of second-growth and old-growth fuels in the background created by the 1996 Charlton Fire. The men had been on a weekend canoe camping trip. Photo by USFS Forester Jim Williams.



Fig. 6. Charlton Reburn, 2025. Tim Bailey and Jim Williams approach a “swale that intersects the water table,” a fairly common feature in the High Cascades plateau. September 9, 2025 photo by Bob Zybach.

Link with Willamette National Forest — New Forest Supervisor Meg Mitchell

Meg Mitchell comes to her new position as Supervisor of the Willamette National Forest with 20 years of Forest Service experience, most recently as Forest Supervisor on the Green Mountain and Finger Lakes National Forests. Mitchell also worked in Washington, DC, for three years and in Alaska for nine. Mitchell has a degree in Landscape Architecture from Colorado State University and a Masters degree in Forestry from the University of Idaho. Since arriving in Oregon in October 2009, she has demonstrated a keen interest in natural resources issues and especially the public's sense of the values of public lands.

"I'm looking forward to serving on the Willamette and being a part of their strong tradition of providing high quality services and sustainable products, and managing public lands with future generations in mind. The Willamette is known for its highly motivated employees and strong relationships with the scientific community and other partners. On a personal note, I'm thrilled to be returning to the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, and am especially looking forward to exploring the Willamette's world class waters, recreation areas, and Wildernesses."



Meg Mitchell, Forest Supervisor, Willamette National Forest. Photo courtesy of the Forest Service.

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Fig. 7. Meg Mitchell replaced Dallas Emch, who was being promoted, as Willamette National Forest Supervisor in October 2009, just as the 15,000-acre Tumblebug Fire was dying out.

extinguished, Willamette NF Supervisor Dallas Emch -- who authorized the Jim's Creek Project -- was being replaced by a new Supervisor, Meg Mitchell. The fire had occurred in a so-called "Matrix" portion of the Willamette, meaning it could be actively managed. The existence of an existing road network made salvage logging and reforestation obvious -- and profitable -- treatment opportunities.

As staff Silviculturist and initial leader of the Interdisciplinary Team for the Tumblebug Fire Recovery Project, Bailey was not too surprised when Mitchell decided she was still too new to the job, "hadn't had a sufficient opportunity to develop a relationship with local environmental groups yet," and therefore didn't want to spark litigation or appear adversarial by offering a timber sale.

When Bailey was first heard her decision he "threw his hands into the air" and began seriously considering his retirement options.

Predictably, the Tumblebug began burning again in 2025 and a public informational meeting was held on August 29 in Oakridge to explain. New Willamette NF Supervisor, Robert Sanchez, new Middle Fork Ranger District Forester, Gabe Wishart, and several individuals from the imported firefighting crews gave presentations and led the discussion.

They reported the previous day's crews had been stationed at Indigo Springs and barely kept the renamed "Emigrant Fire" from entering the 11,000 acre burn scar from the adjacent -- and equally untreated -- 2024 "208 Fire."

On the 29th the fire grew several thousand acres in size and had almost exactly reburned the 2009 Tumblebug (see map). The great amount of burning logs, brush and flaming

snags made the site too dangerous for firefighters to enter. These facts weren't mentioned during the meeting, which was televised live for YouTube, likely because the presenters were not aware of this history.

In following weeks the fire grew another 17,000 acres before being extinguished by fall rains. If an east wind had come up during that time, the fire would have become much greater.

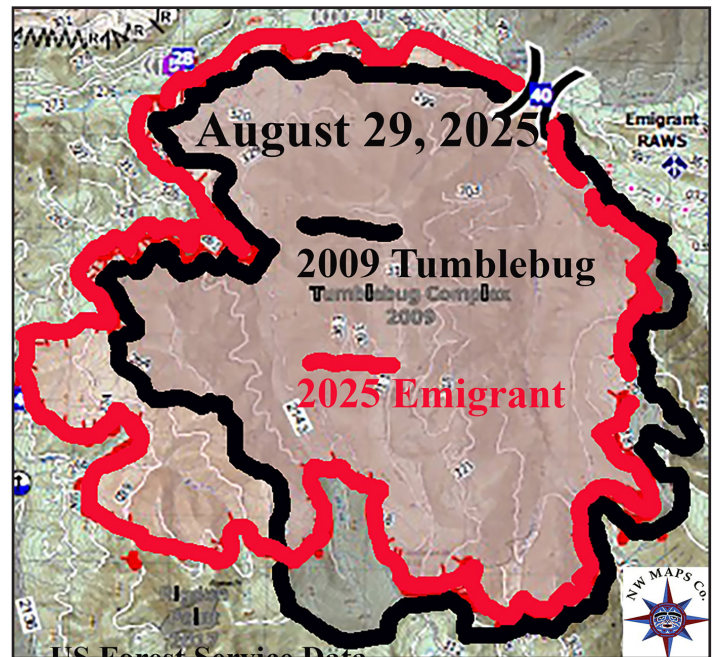
2020-2025 Lane County Wildfires

The series of catastrophic wildfires that began on Labor Day, September 8, 2020 in western Oregon was the worst in the State's history. Nearly a million acres burned, more than 4,000 homes were destroyed, and tens of millions of wildlife were killed -- almost all within a two- or three-day period.

Toxic, acrid smoke blanketed the region for weeks. More than 400,000 people were subjected to evacuations during that time; ten people were killed and hundreds more have likely died, and will continue to die prematurely, because of wildfire smoke damage to their heart or lungs.

The towns of Phoenix, Detroit, Blue River, Vida, and Talent were destroyed.

During that time and since I've done what I could to bring public attention to these



Map. 2009 Tumblebug Burn and August 29, 2025 Emigrant Fire Extent. The Emigrant continued to grow through September and added 17,000 more burned acres to this

fires: how to prevent them; how to best protect our homes and communities from these events; and how to leave better, safer, more beautiful, and productive forests for future generations.

That was my training as a reforestation contractor; the focus of my education at OSU College of Forestry; my job description as Program Manager for ORWW.org; why I have volunteered the past 15 years with the National Wildfire Alliance (NWA); and the only reason I became a short-term politician last year.

These efforts have been shared and initiated by a number of other hopefully influential reporters, supporters, and organizations: Lars Larson; Rick Dancer; Jim Petersen and Evergreen; Cristy Rein and Oregon Fish & Wildlife Journal; Rob Taylor Report; Nick Smith and HFHC; Jen Hamaker and ONRI; NWA; iSpy Mark Anderson; western Oregon counties, Tribes, and newspapers; Southwest Oregon Community College (SWOCC); the Elliott; OASTL-- and even Lane County politics!

All to little avail. Our forests keep burning up, our wildlife keeps dying, our air continues to be polluted, and our rural schools, towns, businesses, and families continue to decline.

Increasingly onerous environmental regulations and litigation have made this degradation of our public forests and destruction of our rural schools and communities a predictable certainty. The proof is everywhere in western Oregon and northern California.

Meanwhile, a diminishing flow of experienced and knowledgeable concerns, advice and recommendations has continued to be ignored -- with problems and proposed solutions based instead on Global Warming rationale or other taxpayer-funded political construct.

The dead and dying trees of the 2020 Oregon Labor Day Fires should have been sold and harvested as quickly as possible, as advised. They have not, and they continue to be an increasingly deadly and costly wildfire risk.

Full-time family-wage jobs and paths to citizenship by experienced workers are critically needed -- and avoided.

Landscape-scale historical research remains a critical need

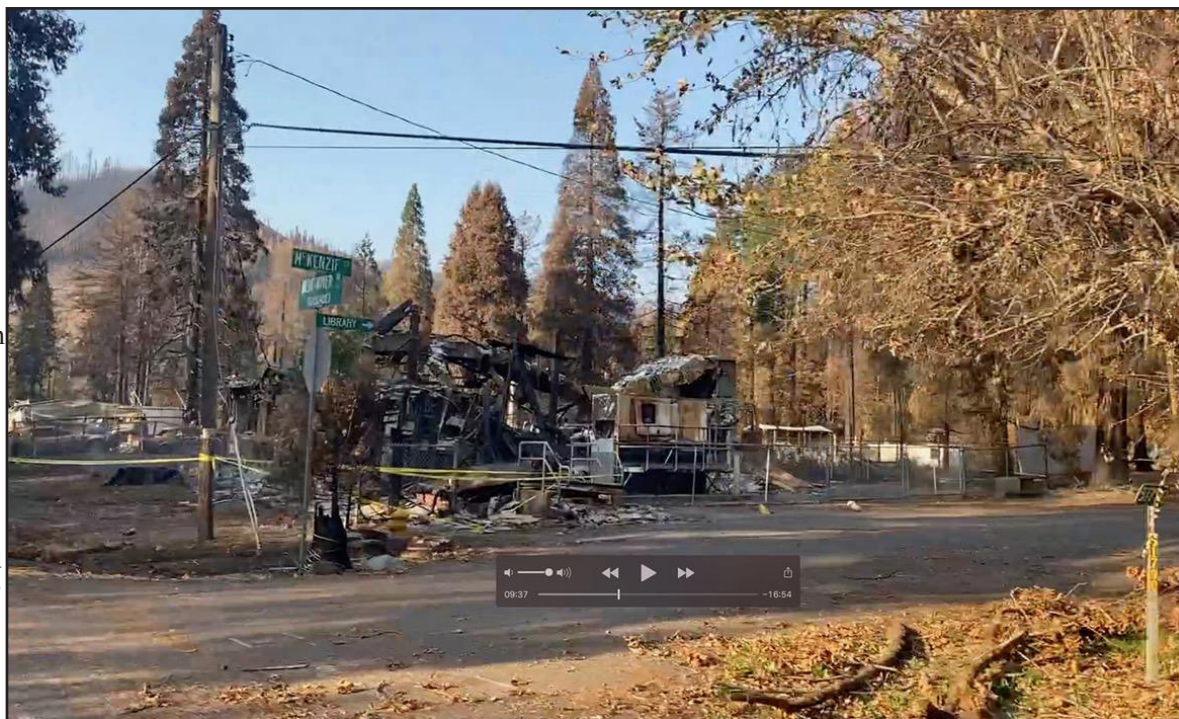


Fig. 8. Blue River, 2020. McKenzie Street and Library sign in Blue River, destroyed in the Holiday Farm Fire on September 7, 2020. October 6, 2020 video-clip by McKenzie Peters, NW Maps Co.

for ever actually restoring our forests -- and is ignored.

Proven Indigenous uses of fire and forest maintenance need to be reintroduced -- and are not.

What to do?

A Possible Future

Bill Hagenstein coined the term "Environmentalitis" in

Eastern Lane County Forest Service Wildfires, 2020-2025

Year & Name	Size	Suppression
2020 Holiday Farm	173,000 Acres	\$42,000,000
2021 Middle Fork Complex	31,000 Acres	\$55,000,000
2022 Cedar Creek-Charlton	127,000 Acres	\$132,000,000
2023 Bedrock	32,000 Acres	\$50,000,000
2023 Lookout	26,000 Acres	\$19,000,000
2024 Lane-1	26,000 Acres	\$76,000,000
2024 208	11,000 Acres	\$8,000,000
2025 Emigrant-Tumblebug	33,000 Acres	\$27,000,000
6 Years	459,000 Acres	\$409,000,000

Table. Size and suppression costs of major east Lane County, Oregon wildfires, 2020-2025.

1971, less than two years after the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and the Environmental Law Institute



Fig. 9. 2023 Lookout Burn. The remnants of an Indian prairie can be seen along the ridge-line seeding in to Douglas fir, noble fir, grand fir, and white fir. It can also be noted the remining prairie served as an effective fuel break, saving many of these invasive conifers. Near the center of the photo is a plantation that followed a 1960s clearcut. If the unburned trees are to be saved, they need to be thinned and the dead trees cleared away from them. June 11, 2026 photo by Bob Zybach.

(ELI) were both formed in DC within 24 hours of each other.

Hagenstein had used the example of environmental proponents changing the meaning of the word “conservation” from “wise use” of forest resources to “protection” of chosen species by mostly eliminating active management of forest resources for human benefit. His concern was heightened by the fact that others in the forest industry were allowing this re-definition to be used publicly without comment or correction.

Since that time we have seen the same process take place with other words and phrases that had previously meant something substantially different from today’s interpretations: terms such as “prescribed fire,” “suppression,” “sustained yield,” and even “forest restoration.”

These Orwellian changes in language -- and thus changing public perceptions, followed by general acceptance -- have largely been brought about and even codified by politicians and environmental lawyers through regulations and litigation.

The so-called “timber wars” have been fought in courtrooms, not forests, and are typically characterized by an esoteric blizzard of acronyms, metrics, Latin, and obscure legal citations spread over thousands of pages and mostly

unknown or undecipherable to the vast majority of taxpayers paying for it.

These rulings became accepted in large part because we were told it was “scientists,” not lawyers or politicians, that were supposedly leading this effort and giving it the cover of credibility.

As Hagenstein observed: “The environmentalitis epidemic has swept our country from the halls of Congress to weekly newspapers. It has been a viable movement, carefully conceived, cultivated and campaigned . . . as the urban folk, from student to senior citizen, have been sold a bill of goods which indicts forestry as something bad instead of something good for land and for people.

“We who grow the trees have a pretty important part to play in stemming this epidemic because of our greatest asset -- the renewability of our remarkable resource.

“So let’s turn environmentalitis from an epidemic into an endeavor, an effort, an exercise in betterment in every possible way.”

In November 2025, attorney Ted Nordhaus gave a lecture to environmental law students and faculty at Lewis & Clark College titled “Environmental Law After Environmentalism.”



Fig. 10. This photo of Tim Bailey on the Indigo Springs Trail shows an important remaining population of old-growth that survived both the 2024 208 Fire and the 2025 Emigrant Fire. To fully protect these trees from likely reburns or seasonal fire starts, competing second-growth, ladder fuels, and basal ground fuels should be removed. If done strategically, this could produce important local jobs and positive tax revenues for county, state, and federal coffers, as well as preserve these older trees for future generations. June 8, 2026 photo by Bob Zybach.

Speaking and writing 55 years after Hagenstein and to an entirely different audience, Nordhaus came to a very similar conclusion: things were broken, but they were fixable. There was hope, if people would only listen and act.

Nordhaus' father, Robert, had perhaps been the very first environmental lawyer in DC during the sixties, while Wilderness and the Endangered Species Act were being crafted into law. Today he estimates there are more than 30,000 such practitioners.

His concern was the most recent generation of these lawyers had either been: "promulgating [environmental] rules, litigating them, or helping governments, businesses, and property owners comply with them. And . . . I have to ask whether this has been a particularly good use of those talents and the enormous resources that institutions such as this one have invested in training them?"

Nordhaus' answer to his rhetorical question was: "obviously, no. But I would be remiss in offering this sort of provocation without suggesting . . . where it is that the environmental movement and environmental law needs to go from here."

Nordhaus characterized this generational professional failure to a large degree because the: "flowering of environmental concern, activism, and ultimately lawyering in the early 1970s brought a one-time bonanza, accelerating trends that were already underway. There was lots of low hanging pollution fruit to capture at very low cost. But the environmental movement learned the wrong lessons from those early successes, over indexed on legal and regulatory strategies, and built an enormous legal and political infrastructure to prosecute those strategies to increasingly little effect."

This was the same perspective shared by Hagenstein for the remainder of his life and career. And Nordhaus' advice was very similar: "the question for the environmental law profession over the coming decades, in my view, is not what will you stop but what will you build?"

Our forest resources are not what we were given by our parents and grandparents, and it is not right to leave this costly mess as our heritage to our own children and grandchildren. Our forests need to be fixed. Our laws need to be amended. We know how to do it. The question is why we don't.

