

Phil Aune

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Nine Mile Falls, Washington: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FrSrp8xaPQ>

Fuel Management & Reforestation

What I'm here to talk about today is what I call "the legacy." The legacy of wildfires. And I'm primarily talking about Oregon, Washington, and California, where I have some experience. I also see it in Idaho and Montana, in my travels around those States.

The first point I see is the vast majority of the dead trees are not being salvaged. The first legacy that we're going to see is thousands and thousands of acres of black, standing trees, as long as they're standing for the next 20 to 30 years.

Meanwhile, trees will ultimately die and fall to the ground and become fuel for the inevitable next wildfire, making it even more difficult to control and, more importantly, all that fuel will now be on the surface, and that surface fuels will concentrate the heat on the upper end of the soil profile, severely damaging the soil.

So it's a long-term productivity effect that no one has really researched extensively -- to follow up exactly what's happening to these wildfires, especially the reburns that have occurred in wildfire areas.

Very little of the ground in the legacy is being reforested, and we're developing a huge reforestation backlog. Keep in mind that in 1976, in a National Forest Management Act portion, Congress dictated us -- to the Forest Service -- to develop the reforestation background.

And here's what the National Forest Management Act said, in Section 6.1.d.: "It is the policy of Congress that all forested lands in the National Forest system shall be maintained in appropriate forest cover . . ."

"Shall be maintained in appropriate forest cover!" Where in the heck is that going on?

". . . with the species of tree, degree of stocking, rate of growth, and conditions of stands designated to secure the maximum benefits for multiple use and stained

yield concepts in the land management, according to the land management plans."

So why aren't they reforesting these lands? That's a big question.

Congress even developed the funding mechanism necessary to reforest all the lands in the backlog. It was called R and I Fund: "Reforestation and Stand Improvement." The money came from offshore oil receipts. It wasn't even a problem in getting the funds -- and if we start looking at our resources in total, we can expand our oil production, expand our revenues from that. It all works together to making life easier for everyone.

The real reforestation backlog that was declared in 1976 has grown substantially. And if you look at the last 20 years, that's where the bulk of the backlog is growing.

Well, what's going to happen to all of these lands?

The lands that are not actively reforested will change into brush and hardwood communities for the next 75 to 100 years. Yes, they will naturally regenerate, but how much time do you have? How much time do our children have? How much time do our grandchildren, our great grandchildren? This is a real issue. We're leaving black forest and brush fields in what once was magnificent conifer forest . . . that's the condition that our grandchildren will receive.

Next point I'd like to make is we don't have to do that. We have the knowledge and skills from science-based reforestation. And I can speak personally from that, as a research program manager whose mission was to look at the entire reforestation cycle for the last . . . 13 years of my career -- plus the practical experience I had during the time I was in active management.

The Forest Service has this background, and it includes the following necessary steps:

Collection and storage of the seeds -- the cones and the seeds that we're going to need to reforest the land. It's a no-brainer. We have to establish nurseries to grow these seedlings. We don't have to have bare-root nurseries. We can go with container nurseries. But the Forest Service has to start expanding if they're ever going to get back on top of the reforestation backlog.

Here's probably the most critical point: you need prompt salvage of the wildfires. Roger [Jaegel] spoke about that at length. That what's happening -- if you don't salvage them, those trees are still going to be there, and they're fuel. And then, from a common-sense point of view: does it make sense to cut green trees when you got thousands and thousands of dead trees to cut that are still utilizable?

We need to do proper site preparation. We've got to have planting crews available. It's a temporary work job, and we definitely need to provide for common-sense planting crews and have that workforce available.

The biggest point we have to do is prepare to reduce plant competition after planting because, as we live in most of the California, Oregon, and Washington, in the dry Mediterranean type of environments, the seedlings have to survive with the moisture that's left in the soil, and unless you control the grass and the brush -- competing plants -- all of your planting efforts will be for nil, as many, many of the trees die. I've investigated thousands of acres of dead seedlings, and the biggest factor that you find after planting, and you go look at why they die, is we didn't control plant competition.

Reforestation is a commitment to all of these processes -- and just as much as not reforesting is a commitment to understanding and recognizing that it's going to take centuries for all these forests to eventually regenerate naturally.

Joe [Reddan] mentioned the Organic Act of 1897, when Congress "far-eyed" it, and one of the key purposes was to provide for the protection and maintenance of our National Forest. How can we look the public in the eye and say: "we are providing for the protection and maintenance?"

The second major factor was: protect the headwaters of navigable streams. Where, on God's Green Earth, have they ever protected the headwaters of navigable streams with using concepts like "managing wildfires for resource benefits," which is just a euphemism for not fighting fires promptly.

The last one was that they -- after they provide the protection and maintenance -- the third purpose was to provide for continuous supply of timber for the citizens of the United States. Good luck on that one! Thank you very much.

Hi! My name is Phil Aune. I have a 50-year career in the forestry arena -- 37 years

with the U.S. Forest Service, and with my last assignment as 13 years as a research program manager. After that I served six years as Vice-President of the California Forestry Association, and since I flunked retirement after we moved to Spokane, Washington, I went to work as a consultant for the American Forest Resource Council.

We've lived in Spokane, Washington for the last 20 years, but I constantly go back to California [to] see my grandchildren, and on the way I usually take time to look at some of the wildfires. It's easy to see they're everywhere.

I'm also on the Board of Directors of the Evergreen Foundation, that's Jim's [Petersen] foundation, and I'm also a member of the Board of Directors of the National Museum of Forest Service History.