

MY OPINION FROM BEHIND THE GREEN DOOR

The art of forestry

BY CHRIS BRATT

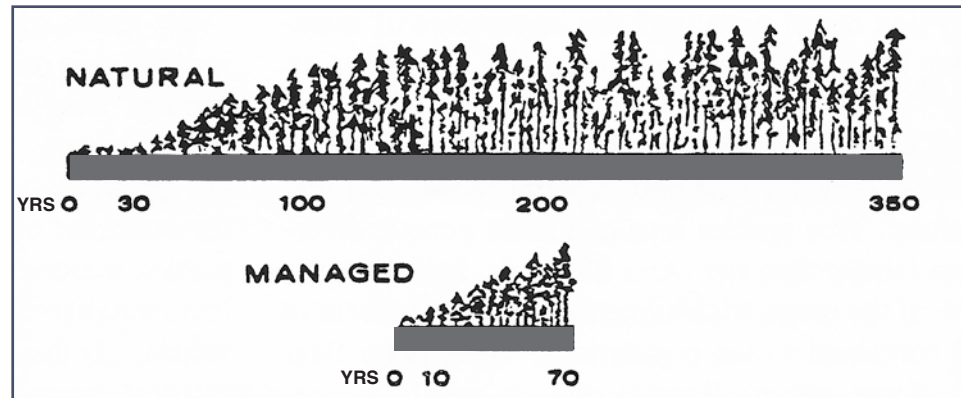
Living here in the Applegate for 38 years and working in the midst of all these awe-inspiring sculptures of nature changed my thinking about what is needed to maintain and enhance a forest. Little did I realize how much time, energy, skill, knowledge and art was needed to care for these individual masterpieces we call trees, standing in these harmonious landscapes we call forests. It doesn't matter if you believe that they were formed by evolutionary processes, Mother Nature, or some deity. We are surrounded by truly great works of art native to our area and beyond. We are living in a natural history museum, a gallery without walls that generates natural resources that are beautiful, useful and necessary for human and many other species' well-being and life.

Scientific studies show that most of the region's forests have been around for about 6,000 years and have been constantly changed by natural disturbances like weather, wildfire, floods, insects, etc. These natural events could make immediate changes to forests or they could take many years to affect any structural change.

But for these 6,000 years, it didn't matter at what pace natural processes were taking place because we humans were not a significant part of the changing picture. The entire forest landscape was growing very well without the concepts of modern human science, intervention, disturbance, management, or art. Without human interference, our natural forests changed over time, but they were always in balance—an aesthetically pleasing combination of all the parts.

But about 150 years ago, these

balanced, pristine forests were entered by the more technically advanced Americans, intruding pioneers, who built railroads and brought new tools, inventions, energy and ideas for using the region's forests. Gold, lumber and space for possible agriculture were up for grabs. The resulting population growth and economic opportunities led to well over a century of unfettered natural resource extraction (timber, minerals, etc.) and other forms of development. The consequences of these unrestrained



This illustration represents the age difference between our region's forests in their functioning natural state and the simplified, shortened and intensely managed state currently in practice on millions of forestland acres. From "Modifying Douglas-fir management regimes for nontimber objectives" by Jerry Franklin, Thomas Spies, David Perry, et al, 1986.

negative actions have left our Oregon forests in such awful condition that many will take hundreds of years to heal (if ever given the chance).

The same appalling actions are still being practiced today under the names of "Intensive Forest Management" and "Risk Management." Even with new laws protecting parts of our environment, both industrial/private forestland owners (accounting for about one-third of Oregon's forests) and federal

land management agencies (Bureau of Land Management and US Forest Service) continue a strong bias toward timber production over other resource values and forest health. The resulting ongoing simplification of forest systems has become a very great concern to many scientists and citizens. Simplifying or eliminating the stages of forest succession under "Intensive Forest Management" has become the standard practice. (In the illustration, look at the difference in the time it takes

to develop a forest between a natural and a managed timber stand.) This kind of forest management reduces the options of forest managers and communities, and it also ignores major elements needed to make the whole ecosystem work.

Many citizens, scientists and land managers are increasingly concerned about the elimination of species, functions and other important values that natural forests provide. We don't even know yet what all the parts of

a forest ecosystem are, let alone what they do. It's obvious to me that the present policies of "intensive forest management" (extensive clear-cutting and herbicide use on private lands) and "risk management" (reduced species survival levels and lowered resource protections to a degree that's barely sustainable on public lands) must end, even if it reduces forest timber-cutting objectives. The real art of forestry is maintaining and enhancing the biological diversity of these precious forests (original works of art). It will require a lot more artfulness than we have shown to develop approaches that retain the complexities of our natural forests. We can no longer put our forests at risk at this very massive scale for the economic benefit of a few.

More imaginative leaders are needed—foresters and scientists, forest managers and planners, politicians and loggers, communities and individuals, citizen foresters and conservationists—to open our eyes and minds to long-term forest sustainability. Artists are needed to sculpt a new creative art of forestry, one that restores and mirrors nature. We need a new "Forest Renaissance" that reflects the harmony between all earth's creatures and brings our dying forests back to life. It's time to get out your easel, canvas and art supplies and paint a new picture, because humankind's most inspiring masterpieces need your help.

If you think I need help too, give me a call and let me know.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Thinning should be considered

Editor:

Because the terminology that describes fire management activities can be vague and sometimes contradictory, I feel the need to respond to the use of the term "thinning" as used in Chant Thomas' opinion piece in the last *Applegater*. I do this based on my own fire experience as a division supervisor, hotshot crew foreman and fuels planner for the Forest Service and as fire program coordinator for The Wilderness Society.

One of our most effective fire prevention tools goes by the name "thinning." Thinning can reduce fire spread and fire severity. Correctly done, thinning restores ecosystem structure and function. Thinning works on the principle that tree diameter is a function of spacing.

Most of the thinning in the Applegate is designed to reduce the rate of spread and severity of wildfires. Thin-from-below followed by slash treatment is the standard prescription for forests near houses, along driveways and evacuation routes. Thin-from-below means you cut the smaller trees, often also removing sick trees and trees with a low crown ratio. You usually leave the largest, healthiest trees of the most fire-resistant species. In most cases you pile the slash and burn it after the fall rains have wet things down.

This reduces the load of small, highly flammable fine fuels that are richly supplied with oxygen and can therefore burn with great intensity. Thinning also breaks up the fire "ladder" of branches and leaves, reducing the likelihood of a surface fire transitioning to a crown fire. Thinning increases the vigor of the remaining trees. These residual trees increase in diameter and their crowns grow together, shading the ground. This shade tends to decrease the amount of fine fuels growing at the surface, further reducing the intensity of future fires.

Thus, a positive feedback loop is created. Larger trees tend to survive fires due to their larger diameter, there is an increasing gap between surface and crown fuels, more of the fine fuels are sequestered high in the tree crowns, and therefore less is growing on the ground. The overall effect is an increasingly fire-resilient forest.

This type of thinning is a rough "fire surrogate" in that it imitates the thinning effect of the once common low-severity fires found in mixed conifer forests, allowing fire-resistant trees to grow very large. Even in the relatively dry forests of the Applegate, the result of surface fires every 5 to 15 years was the very big, fire-adapted trees we occasionally see today.

Thinning is a powerful tool for reducing the amount of high-severity fire. If people who live in mixed conifer forests want to be fire safe, they should consider thinning.

Rich Fairbanks
Jacksonville, OR

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