

Roving Reporter

Lessons from Florida

BY TOM CARSTENS

Two things Florida can teach the other 49 states: how to make a good margarita and how to deal with the aftermath of a hurricane.

—Tom Feeney, former Speaker of the Florida House

It's early November. My wife and I are about two-thirds of the way on a clockwise continental camping trip—11,000 miles so far. We're seeing our country from the back roads. Imagine traveling about two-thirds that distance on Highway 238 and the rest on North Applegate Road!

We recently camped in the Lake Talquin State Forest on the Florida panhandle. This area west of Tallahassee was decimated by Hurricane Michael. Even 50 miles inland, the devastation wrought by this mighty storm was truly shocking. We have close family members who are struggling in the aftermath.

The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) reports that over five million acres of woodlands were damaged in the area. Florida timber losses are estimated to be around \$1.6 billion. Salvage of southern yellow pine has already begun. According to the WSJ, yellow pine has lost 95 percent of its value and is largely headed for the pulp mills.

In some respects, the aftereffects seem opposite from those of a wildfire—it looked to us like some of the larger diameter trees (especially the oaks) really took a hit, while the saplings came through pretty much unscathed. In other ways, the aftermath was similar to what we've seen with wildfires—the same random mosaic “patterns,” with rare areas where no trees survived. Why did most of the trees in one section topple, leaving just a few? And why did almost all the

trees in an adjacent section survive? And how is it that some forested areas received no damage at all?

Unlike wildfire, which affects some species more than others, hurricanes make no distinctions. The entire biological landscape gets equal treatment, no matter the species. Likewise, neither forest density nor management style seems to make a difference. Commercial plantations fared no worse or better than native forests. Even areas within thick, dense vegetation were not protected. Damage patterns on the fringes were indistinguishable from those in the core.

A couple of Florida state foresters confirmed our observations. In our discussion, we learned that the state works hard to support healthy forests in these ways:

Cycles of prescribed burns. In the 50 square miles of Lake Talquin woodlands, the burn interval is one and a half years. The average on state lands is two to four years. The goal is to mitigate wildfire damage and to restore the natural wildlife habitat. Smoke apparently isn't a problem because they are careful to wait for winds that blow toward unpopulated areas and for the right smoke dispersal index so they can be confident that the smoke will rise fast and dissipate. Complaints, they say, are virtually nonexistent.

Regular thinning. This supports natural ecosystem health and lessens the risk of crown fires. Timber harvest is not a goal. Each state forest receives a different prescription depending on species variation.

The foresters wanted us to understand that there was virtually nothing they could do to protect forests from the destruction wrought by hurricanes. This made us wonder if this could also be true



This Florida pine forest was virtually destroyed by Hurricane Michael. Photo: Tom Carstens.



A hurricane caused this mature oak to snap at its base. Photo: Tom Carstens.

for wildfires in the Rogue Valley. Are fire and smoke inevitable? Or will our land managers be able to figure this out?

As Florida forest ranger Clint Peters put it, “Fire—you're going to have it;

you're not really going to control it. The question is: do you try to set the conditions beforehand or just leave it up to the whims of Mother Nature?”

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