



Before (left) and after (right) photos of a mixed pine and oak woodland shows how thinning reduces the fuel load on the land, making it easier to fight wildfires. Photo: Luke Ruediger.

Lifesaving ‘PODs’ in the Applegate?

BY RICH FAIRBANKS

Applegate residents live in fire country and have done an impressive job creating defensible space around their homes. A 2011 survey found that almost 90 percent of respondents have built and are maintaining defensible space around their homes. Many others have joined together to complete fuel treatment on private roadways. Yet, if we have a large, intense fire that forces us to evacuate, are we really prepared?

Many years ago, my wife and I bought 20 acres on a road off Sterling Creek. Before we even started building the house our neighbors asked if we would agree to grant-funded fuels reduction work for the road that serves six households. We readily agreed. About every five years, we and our neighbors apply for grants,

chip in money, or do the work to keep the roadside brushed out. It looks great and ensures a safer evacuation route in the event of a fire.

But what about our main roads, our evacuation routes? Can Griffin Lane, Sterling Creek Road, even Highway 238 handle a sudden influx of hundreds of frightened drivers evacuating through smoke and even flame, while busloads of firefighters and equipment try to get in to attack the fire? Are these roads cleared of surface fuels? Have the limbs been pruned up? Is there good line of sight, so crews can see spot fires? If not, we have work to do for successful evacuation and firefighting.

Some of us locals are working to implement fuel treatments along these critical routes. Eighty-five people died in the Camp Fire in

Paradise, California, in 2018, many while evacuating in their cars. Fire professionals knew well in advance that Paradise was vulnerable. A 2009 civil grand jury concluded that roads leading from Paradise had “significant constraints” and “capacity limitations” as evacuation routes: sharp curves and inadequate and hazardous shoulders. Such road conditions “increase the fire danger and the possibility of being closed due to fire and or smoke.”

We have formed a group called Prescription for Safety (PFS) to begin the work needed along our evacuation routes. One way to accomplish this work and potentially bring in funding is to identify “Potential Operational Delineations” (PODs): mapped lines, such as roads, trails, and recent fuel treatments, that can help contain wildfires. These are targeted areas where fuels treatments can help fire fighters.

Prescription for Safety hopes to develop PODs in partnership with property owners and fire professionals to help bring in funding and do more roadside fuels work.

A lot of this work is already happening. As an example, here is John Galego’s story:

We bought 38 acres with steep forest in 2012 to build our home. The building department informed me of the fire inspection requirements. Where would I start, without an unlimited budget for hiring someone?

In 2013, I learned that money is available for thinning. I received an ODF grant for five acres, covering half of the \$5,000 cost.

We hired a local company to thin an area bordering our access road.

The forester left the logs on the forest floor, an acceptable practice, burned the slash, and limbed up what he could reach. We passed inspection and received the grant.

Then, between 2013 and 2019, Douglas-fir trees near Griffin Lane and our neighborhood access road started to die. With the winter winds of 2018, the trees started to fall over. In the fall of 2019, I counted 90 dead firs in the roadside.

I have started to remove the dead firs, but our roads are still threatened. I will burn slash safely in the wet months. I have learned how to handle a chainsaw and can fell a tree. My work has not only made my home safer; it has increased the chances for successful evacuation in the event of a big fire.

John and other members of PFS are working to implement PODs through brushing out our roadsides. We are starting this work in the Little Applegate. Please reach out if you want to get involved.


Rich Fairbanks is a local fire professional with over 40 years of experience in firefighting and forest management. He is working with local residents on a project called Prescription for Safety in the Little Applegate that is mapping PODs and evacuation routes. For more information, email him at richfairbanks3@gmail.com.



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A pair of photos show a wooded area along Griffin Lane before (top) and after (bottom) “fuel treatment”—the removal of excess wood that would fuel a wildfire. Photo: John Galego.