

THE SISKIYOU MOUNTAIN ADVOCATE

BLM salvage logging and its effects on the environment

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

In recent years beetle mortality has become a visceral sign of climate change, with flat-headed fir borers chewing through low-elevation stands of Douglas fir and bark beetles attacking ponderosa pine trees. Mortality occurred in large patches at low elevations, especially on droughty sites, harsh exposures, sites with poor soils, sites more conducive to oak woodland, chaparral, or mixed hardwood stands, and in many previously implemented “forest health” logging projects.

Since the 1990s, federal land managers have implemented landscape-scale logging projects supposedly intended to increase “forest health” and resilience to drought and beetle mortality; however, in many locations these “restoration” thinning projects have had the opposite effect and both the false claims used to justify the logging and the forested habitats “treated” by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have begun to unravel.

In response to this recent tree mortality, the BLM has prescribed yet more logging, this time “salvage” logging in former forest-health thinning projects that subsequently sustained significant tree mortality. The newest proposal includes 5,000 acres of salvage logging throughout southwestern Oregon and the Applegate Valley and would include the removal of both dead standing trees and live green trees that survived the recent mortality events. The removal of these naturally resistant trees undermines the selective pressures and evolutionary processes that build resilience in our local forests and will impact forest health, habitat, and biological values.

Many people seem to think salvage logging is benign, and the BLM even

claims the logging will be beneficial. Yet, a closer look at recently implemented salvage logging on Lick Gulch in the Little Applegate Valley reveals a very different story involving large-scale clear-cut logging, massive soil disturbance, stream sedimentation, noxious and nonnative weed spread, plantation development, increased fire risks, and reduced resilience, as well as dramatic impacts to many wildlife species and their habitat.

Many people also believe that forests with significant beetle mortality sustain higher fire risks and that salvage logging reduces these fire risks by removing woody biomass. Yet, significant scientific research demonstrates otherwise. Extensive research has shown that beetle mortality does not increase fire risks, fire likelihood, or fire severity, including research in the Pacific Northwest (Meigs et al, 2015), in the Rocky Mountains (Simard et al, 2011), and in California (Bond et al, 2009).

At the same time, salvage logging is also known to deposit significant logging slash in one massive flush onto the forest floor. This increases both fine and coarse fuel loading, while the logging also removes microclimate conditions that contribute to more moderate fire activity. Unfortunately, salvage logging is also followed by artificial tree planting and plantation development, which dramatically increase fire risks by maximizing dense, young, even-aged, and highly flammable vegetation.

Snag habitat is also important for innumerable wildlife species as foraging habitat for perches, for dens, and for cavity nesting. If left undisturbed, complex early seral habitat created by wildfires and beetle mortality create some of



Recent BLM salvage logging on Lick Gulch in the Little Applegate Valley was implemented as widespread clear-cut logging with all the associated impacts to scenery, wildlife, watershed health, and fire risks. Photo: Luke Ruediger.

the most diverse habitat in our local environment. The flush of hardwoods, herbaceous species, grasses, sunlight, and an important mosaic of living trees and standing snags creates the ideal conditions for numerous wildlife species, including rodents, insects, and ungulates, who create a complex food chain, supporting local black bears, cougars, coyotes, foxes, massive populations of woodpeckers, terrestrial salamanders, and large raptors, to name a few.

Additionally, the removal of standing snags will degrade forest conditions by starving future stands of coarse woody debris, standing snags, and habitat complexity. Snags act as important biological legacies and are important for the biological integrity of beetle-affected ecosystems.

Snag habitat is also important in building forest complexity and as

recruitment for coarse downed wood, which holds moisture, builds forest soils, harbors mycorrhizal fungus, and aids forest regeneration. Snags also store significant carbon on the landscape for long periods of time. At the same time, logging immediately releases the majority of that carbon into the atmosphere.

The results of salvage logging are quite literally clear-cut. Rather than encouraging a natural, diverse, dynamic vegetative recovery following recent mortality outbreaks, salvage logging degrades habitat, develops additional plantation stands, increases fire risks, and releases naturally stored carbon through tree and snag-removal operations. Rather than making our forests more resilient, the BLM is fueling the climate and biodiversity crisis.

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