

Fall update from Siskiyou Mountains Ranger District-Star Ranger Station

Happy Fall, Applegate Community and Partners!

In late spring, the fire and fuels shop treated 321 acres with prescribed fire in the Ashland Watershed and along Palmer Creek in the Applegate. As time allows, crews continue to prepare burn units for this fall and spring by constructing handlines, removing heavy fuel along perimeters, and falling hazard trees to increase firefighter safety (see photo 1). As of July 24, we have had six wildfires on the ranger district, four lightning-caused and two human-caused. We also assisted Oregon Department of Forestry on the Upper Applegate fire with engine and crew support. Excitingly, the Dutchman Lookout has been staffed seven days a week and several fires were reported by our new lookout employee! In addition to fire personnel, the forest has been humming with recreationists and seasonal technicians out collecting data. Forest Service (FS) Road 20 got a bit bumpy, but fortunately we were able to grade it in July.

Here are some updates and reminders on where to find more information.

Upper Applegate Watershed Restoration Project (UAWRP) Environmental Analysis

The Decision Notice for this 52,000-acre project was signed in 2020 and was a unique collaborative approach between stakeholders and federal agencies aiming to restore ecological conditions resilient to disturbances and climate change. For information, including maps, please visit fs.usda.gov/detail/rogue-siskiyou/landmanagement/projects/?cid=fseprd662282.

Progress to date. Surface and ladder fuel reduction will recommence this fall. Felling and yarding work via helicopter is tentatively scheduled to resume in January 2025. Treatments from this project helped firefighters with suppression efforts during the Sulphur Fire.

Grayback Shaded Fuel Break Categorical Exclusion

This project aims to reduce hazardous fuels along FS Road 1010 to Grayback Trail. This shaded fuel break will allow firefighters to safely engage with wildfires and provide a safer ingress and egress for the public. For more information, visit fs.usda.gov/project/?project=63141.

Progress to date. Specialists continue to survey and assess the project area to develop treatment areas. To protect our rare and at-risk plant and animal species, some resource areas require two years of surveys. We hope to have those completed by fall 2025 with a signed decision shortly after.

Yellowjacket Project Area

This proposed footprint bridges the landscape between the UAWRP (see above) and Ashland Forest Resiliency project footprints. The primary focus is to address the unprecedented Douglas-fir mortality through fuel-reduction treatments along main roads (FS Roads 20 and 22, as well as any four-digit roads), around infrastructure and communication sites, and adjacent to private and state property.

Progress to date. We plan to engage interested members of the public in spring 2025. Prior to that, contact Jen Sanborn at jennifer.sanborn@usda.gov to arrange one-on-one opportunities to discuss proposed treatments in the field.

Tamarack Meadow Restoration Project

This meadow system on the Siskiyou Crest is home to a variety of sensitive and unique plant species. In summer 2023, US



Photo 1. A USFS employee bucks a downed tree to minimize surface and ladder fuels for future prescribed burn units.

Photo: US Forest Service.



Photo 2. USFS employees remove an unauthorized outhouse and trench built adjacent to Tamarack Meadow.

Photo: US Forest Service.

Forest Service (USFS) employees noticed an RV pad site created in the meadow, along with an outhouse and 10-foot-long trench to catch human waste.

Progress to date. In July, USFS employees removed the unauthorized outhouse and filled the trench using a small excavator (see photo 2). This fall we plan to restore the area of the RV pad site and transplant grass and sedge plugs to stabilize the soil.

Where can you find information?

GovDelivery. This is a primary method of communication. GovDelivery is a web-based email subscription system that allows anyone to subscribe to information on specific topics and projects that interest them. Whenever information on that project is made available by USFS or the ranger district, you will receive an email. You may customize and manage your subscription profile in order to receive exactly the types of information you desire, and you may cancel your subscriptions at any time. To subscribe, visit public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDAFS/subscriber/new. If you need help signing up for GovDelivery, please contact Amanda Merz at amanda.merz@usda.gov.

Constant Contact. Another primary form of communication, Constant Contact is a web-based email subscription that allows a member of the public to subscribe to our news release mailing list. To subscribe, visit our forest web page at fs.usda.gov/rogue-siskiyou.

RRSNF web page. To view current and recent projects across the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest (RRSNF), please visit fs.usda.gov/projects/rogue-siskiyou/landmanagement/projects.

RRSNF Facebook page. Information shared here is of a general nature that highlights forest projects, events, announcements, and employees. Go to facebook.com/R6RRSNF.

For more information, contact Jen Sanborn at jennifer.sanborn@usda.gov.



There are large numbers of dead and dying Douglas fir on Woodrat Mountain.

Photo: BLM.

Conifer mortality crisis in southwest Oregon

BY ELIZABETH BURGHARD

There's a forest health crisis in southwestern Oregon. The conifer mortality sweeping through the area is of concern for the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The current conifer mortality crisis is an indicator that our forests are not healthy. In overly dense forests, like we have in southwest Oregon, trees face immense competition for water, sunlight, and nutrients. Add periods of prolonged drought, and trees become stressed and weakened. This opens the door for pests, like the flatheaded fir borer beetle to move in. The result is a mosaic of dead and dying trees.

Aerial surveys show that 350,000 acres in southwest Oregon have been impacted by the Douglas-fir die-off, and the Applegate Valley is the epicenter.

Conifer mortality can lead to potential changes in fire behavior and direct safety concerns for wildland firefighters. Recently, dead conifers, while still covered in red needles, have been a potent fuel for fires, leading to increased rate of spread, crown fire potential, and ember production. As the needles fall off, there's an overall loss of canopy. Standing dead trees pose great risk to wildland firefighters. As dead trees fall, surface fuels increase.

As weaker trees lose out in competition for resources and are more intensely targeted by pests, our forests become a mixture of dead and living trees. This combination of stages is particularly problematic. It played out in the 2020 Creek Fire in California. Areas with the highest amounts of dead biomass and live tree densities burned at high severity.

All of these factors make the BLM's work to manage forests and reduce fuels projects more dangerous for firefighters and the community, and more expensive for the American taxpayer.

Residents and visitors should be concerned too. The scale of conifer mortality may change the way firefighters engage wildfires. Standing dead trees can fall across roads and trails, blocking evacuation routes and access for first responders. This mortality will likely increase the size of fires, the cost to put them out, and the amount of smoke generated.

The BLM has been engaging in ecological forestry for more than a decade. The BLM forest and fuels management program, which relies on commercial timber sales, are designed to improve forest health and buffer against this type of die-off. Some of our earliest ecological



Dead and dying trees within the recent Upper Applegate Fire. Photo: BLM.

forestry pilot projects have been successful in reducing mortality so far.

However, protests, appeals, and litigation by groups using misinformation have delayed numerous fuels reduction projects and timber sales, stopping critical work while potentially risking more severe fires. Many of the protested project areas have faced significant die-off, including Neds Bar and Bear Grub in the Applegate Valley and Lost Antelope north of Medford.

An interdisciplinary team of BLM experts is currently working on the Strategic Operations for Safety Environmental Assessment to take a targeted effort to make a difference in places where it matters the most: near homes and roads, and in areas where firefighters have the best chance to catch fires when they are small. Earlier this year, BLM officials sought feedback on the proposal, including locations where residents are concerned about tree mortality. They received 170 comments and used that input to refine the project. Everyone is encouraged to learn more about the project and engage in the planning process at bit.ly/BLMSOS.

BLM employees are committed to improving forest health. Thinning forests gives trees that are more resilient a fighting chance. The idea that forest managers can just walk away and leave them to themselves is irresponsible and dangerous. Forests are dynamic, have been managed and changed throughout history, and need continuous management. The continuation of this management is true forest stewardship.

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