

Applegater

Photo by Linda Kappen

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Celebrating
~31~
Years

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Applegate Valley: Past, present, future

BY MEGAN FEHRMAN

Vitality and resilience have become core principles for A Greater Applegate's (AGA) community-building work. Vitality is the capacity for continuing a meaningful or purposeful existence—the power to live or grow. Resilience is the ability of people and their communities to anticipate and adapt amidst change. Vital and resilient communities enjoy a high quality of life, reliable systems, economic stability, and resources for present and future generations. These concepts have been at play here for generations.

Past

In pre-settler days, the Applegate, known as the S'bank (Beaver River), was home to the Dakubedete and other

nearby and traveling Indigenous groups, bands, or tribes. They took fish and game and gathered acorns, nuts, and berries. They camped along streams, building temporary pole-frame dwellings covered with brush matting or bushes and ferns (Fowler and Roberts, 1994). They stewarded the land with low-intensity fire to enhance the productivity of food-gathering areas shared by multiple groups. They also gathered and traded, thanks to the waterways that made travel possible from the coast to the inlands. Many of these groups were nomadic and only stayed in any specific area for short periods (Lewis, 2021).

See *APPLEGATE VALLEY*, page 13.

Wildfire risk in the Applegate: An origin story

BY NATHAN GEHRES

Looking with dismay at the dead and dying conifer trees in the hills of the Applegate Valley, residents may be asking themselves, "How did we get here?" The current state of our forests is the consequence of over a century of fire exclusion, questionable management practices, and changing growing conditions. As the woodlands depart from their historic makeup, the quality of the habitat they provide degrades, and the risk of an uncharacteristically severe wildfire increases.

First, we need to recognize the factors that led to the situation that our forests and communities are now in. Wildfire shaped southwestern Oregon. The plant and animal species that call this area home evolved with fire and, in some cases, are dependent on it. Naturally occurring fires and Indigenous burning utilized by the first residents of the Applegate created a mosaic landscape that consisted of open meadows, oak savannahs, and mixed-age conifer stands. These landscapes provided a wide variety of habitats that supported healthy plant and animal communities. The onset of fire exclusion, introduced by Euro-American settlers, disrupted this delicately balanced regime. In the absence of regular, low-intensity wildfires, the forest composition changed. Douglas fir trees encroached into lower elevations and drier areas, and shrubby species grew rapidly, all of which

added to the fuels that feed increasingly intense wildfires.

As timber harvesting progressed in the 20th century, monocultural Douglas-fir stands replaced the original native forest that consisted of many species and age classes. Replanting efforts after timber harvest or wildfire have focused on Douglas fir because it is prized for lumber. The unforeseen consequences of those actions are now evident throughout the Applegate.



Current conditions on an Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council project site, before fuels reduction work begins. Photo: Nathan Gehres.

Large swaths of these plantations are dying due to a combination of stresses such as drought, insect attacks, and disease. Max Bennett, a retired Oregon State University Extension forester, documented in his 2023 publication, "Trees on the Edge," that southwestern Oregon has the highest Douglas fir mortality in the nation. Moreover, more trees died in the four years between 2015 and 2019 than died in the four previous decades. Those same four decades, from 1979 to 2021, represent a significant change in growing conditions in the Applegate Valley: average annual precipitation decreased by 1.6 inches, while summer temperatures increased by 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. That's a big change

See *WILDFIRE RISK*, page 14.

Celebrating 60 years of community achievement

BY LAURA B. AHEARN

In 1985, the future of McKee Bridge looked grim. After spending \$43,000 on partial repairs (the equivalent of \$126,000 today), Jackson County Commissioners decided they would no longer commit road funds for the bridge. Public Works Director Joseph Strahl explained that "the bridge isn't significant to the transportation system anymore." The bridge had been closed to vehicles in 1956 when the "modern" concrete bridge was built across the Applegate River a quarter mile upstream. Even after the stopgap repairs in 1985, engineers predicted that the bridge would be unsafe for pedestrians by 1990. Strahl told the commissioners that their choice then would be to invest another \$15,000 or let McKee Bridge crumble into the river "of its own weight in a strong breeze."

But the community did not let a strong breeze take her down! They reached back to the 1965 model of community and nonprofit collaboration to replace the roof, which had collapsed under the heavy snows that triggered the Christmas Flood of 1964. Reporter Tam Moore, who served as County Commissioner during 1974-79, today reflects that "the bridge had friends in the county Roads Department

See *MCKEE BRIDGE*, page 22.

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