How the Forest Service Manages Wildfire

The Forest Service wants the public to believe it fights wildfires, conscientiously. What the Agency hides is, wildfire on public land presents an excuse to provide taxpayer-subsidized logs to the timber industry.

Figure 1 - One of the 20+ temporary log decks (from the clearcut) before being consolidated into Deck 2.

The Forest Service uses euphemisms like “thinning,” “restoring historical conditions,” “resilience,” and “improving forest health” to convince the public that TREES MUST BE CUT TO SAVE THE FORESTS.

But it seems those scientifically refuted assertions do not provide enough taxpayer-subsidized logs for the timber industry. Now the Forest Service has stooped to hiding the fact it has merged logging with fighting wildfire (logging which happens while a wildfire is, in Agency jargon, being “managed”).

An example of how the Forest Service currently manages a wildfire took place earlier this year (2021) on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest.

According to InciWeb, the “Trail Creek Fire started on July 8, 2021, approximately 20 miles West of Wisdom, Montana, as the result of lightning. The fire terrain is made up of forest timber with 2 feet high underbrush and heavy fuel loads of dead and down(ed) Lodgepole.”

That description exaggerated on-the-ground conditions. In reality, much of the area is wet, crisscrossed by multiple streams, and populated by springs that flow year-round. Yes, some areas have underbrush and there are dead and downed trees in few places; however, those areas do not dominate the landscape. To insinuate the entire area has heavy fuel loads and dead and downed trees is not only disingenuous but seems intended to convince the public the Trail Creek Fire is of the "catastrophic" variety.

Figure 2 - This spot is typical of most of the forested area within the Trail Creek Fire's perimeter – little undergrowth and a mix of live and beetle-killed trees.

A survey of the area after the wildfire revealed the Trail Creek Fire performed exactly as recent scientific studies predicted. It produced a mosaic pattern of burns. The result is exactly what the Forest Service claims a forest should look like, a mosaic pattern of grassy meadows and multi-aged trees. Although the Agency claims the wildfire consumed 62,013 acres, an after-fire on-the-ground survey revealed no more than 50% of the land within the fire's perimeter experienced fire.

A major portion of the logging that happened while the wildfire was active occurred along Gibbons Pass Road. An eight-mile long clearcut, 100 to 150 feet wide, bordered the east side of the road from the junction of Highways 93 and 43 to Gibbons Pass.

Figure 3 - A portion of the Gibbons Pass Road 8-mile long clearcut.

Alleging this clearcut is a firebreak defies logic. The Trail Creek Fire occurred downwind from Gibbons Pass Road. The fire activity was disconnected from the road by an extensive wet area populated by year-round springs. The chances of the wildfire reaching Gibbons Pass Road were almost nonexistent. As it turned out, the fire never approached closer than 1.5 miles from the road.

Figure 4 - Further validation the "firebreak" assertion was false is the fact that firefighters camped approximately one-half mile east of Gibbons Pass Road, closer to the active fire.

Unfortunately, rules and regulations that limit Forest Service activities do not apply during a wildfire classified as an "emergency." As stated by a management level Forest Service employee, "During a forest fire, we can do whatever we want." Unethical it may be, but current law allows the Agency to log and perform other environmentally destructive activities during any situation classified "emergency."

Gibbons Road is on the adjoining national forests (Bitterroot and Beaverhead National Forests), so the clearcut required direction from Region 1 headquarters. Given the Region's desire to "get-out-the-cut," the opportunity to legally ignore regulations was too good to pass up.

According to information acquired mid-November from the Forest Service Advertised Timber Sale Dashboard, the logging performed while "managing" the Trail Creek Fire produced two enormous decks of logs. Deck 1 contains 8,822 tons of timber and Deck 2 has 8,391 tons. Deck 2 was opened for bid on November 30th. Deck 1 will be up for bid on December 14th.

Figure 5 - Deck 2—what 8,391 tons of logs looks like. That's a lot of logs!

As if environmental degradation by logging during an active fire was not enough, Region 1 informed the American Forest Resource Council (AFRC) that 250 acres (estimated volume of 5,000 CCF) within the perimeter of the Trail Creek Fire will be available for salvage logging during 2022. That information confirms, Region 1 continues to use the Trail Creek Fire as cover for providing logs to the timber industry. (source AFRC November 2021 Newsletter)

Many people are familiar with fire-related salvage logging, claimed as being necessary to retrieve economic value from fire-damaged trees. Unfortunately, the Agency ignores the substantial body of scientific research showing fire-damaged trees are a natural part of ecosystems that provide needed habitat, food sources, and nesting space for vulnerable wildlife species. That research reveals after-fire logging severely harms ecosystems, wildlife, degrades soil health, and releases massive amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere.

The Forest Service relies on firefighting and logging for much of its revenue. The way the Agency performs those activities puts entire ecosystems, uncountable wildlife species, and humans at risk by systematically damaging public lands and increasing atmospheric greenhouse gases.

You can help stop these destructive Forest Service management practices by informing others. Efforts to eliminate poor management of our public lands need your support. Help FOB – volunteer your time and/or contribute funds to assist legal efforts.