

To learn more about... prescribed
burning and smoke management

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Prescribed burning and smoke management

REDUCING WILDFIRE
RISK, MINIMIZING SMOKE
IN COMMUNITIES



"STEWARDSHIP IN FORESTRY"

Oregon Department of Forestry
Fire Protection program
2600 State St., Salem, OR 97310

Oregon Department of Forestry

*Promoting and practicing
sustainable forestry*

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The need to burn

After timber harvest, forest landowners may reduce the risk of wildfire through controlled (prescribed) burning of unmarketable tree residue, or “slash.” This removes potential fuel for a wildfire. It also prepares the logged site for replanting by releasing nutrients and removing vegetation that would otherwise compete with young trees.

Burn smart to minimize smoke impacts

Since 1972, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) has regulated forestland burning in the state under the Oregon Smoke Management Plan. ODF meteorologists monitor weather conditions, issuing daily forecasts throughout spring and fall. Each year they coordinate hundreds of burn requests from private and public forest landowners.

The Oregon Smoke Management Plan seeks to:

- Protect public health
- Avoid smoke intrusions into designated population areas
- Maximize burning opportunities while minimizing emissions
- Protect visibility in wilderness areas by avoiding main smoke plumes

ODF’s oversight of prescribed burning helps keep the vast majority of controlled burns from bringing smoke into populated areas. However, due to changes in weather and wind, such smoke may occasionally reach a community.

Prescribed burns vs. wildfires

In contrast to prescribed burning, large wildfires often occur when conditions trap smoke in populated valleys for an extended period. Since one of the major reasons for prescribed burning is to eliminate the forest fuel hazard, it makes sense to ignite small, controlled fires during times when the smoke will not likely impact local communities. Then, during the summer when wildfires occur most often, there won’t be the woody fuel available for high-intensity wildfires to burn uncontrolled for days.

The burn permit process

When a forest landowner requests a burning permit, ODF meteorologists check the wind and weather forecast, review the number of burns already scheduled in the area, and consider the amount of slash and the acreage proposed to be burned. If, for example, the predicted wind pattern would likely mix the smoke well in the atmosphere and move it away from designated populated areas, that would favor issuing a permit. But if the airflow could carry significant smoke into a protected community or other sensitive area, that would weigh against a permit.

Throughout most of the year ODF meteorologists provide forecasts and burning instructions that inform landowners where and how much to burn, and the necessary spacing between burns in order to avoid smoke intrusions into populated areas.

This close monitoring minimizes the chance of significant smoke from a prescribed burn reaching a community and affecting the people who live there.

Update to Smoke Management Plan

The 2019 review changes the definition of a smoke intrusion to allow small amounts of smoke into designated protected communities without violating air quality standards.

- This change allows for greater use of prescribed burning to reduce the impact of wildfire.
- Smoke-vulnerable protected communities are being encouraged to develop response plans to notify residents when smoke from prescribed burning is expected and help residents protect themselves to minimize their exposure.



In some parts of Oregon, biomass conversion facilities offer an alternative to burning logging slash. (Photo courtesy of Matt Preusch, The Oregonian)



Burning the debris, or “slash,” left after timber harvest reduces the wildfire hazard and the risk of insect infestation. (Photo courtesy of Ochoco National Forest)

Alternatives to burning

Where a biomass facility is located nearby, forest operators can chip and transport the woody debris rather than burn it onsite. Unfortunately, high transportation costs limit the cost-effectiveness of this option in many areas. Alternatives that avoid transportation include leaving the material onsite by chipping, crushing, piling or spreading the slash to make room for new trees to be planted.



Learn more about prescribed burning...

Visit us on the web at:
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