

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 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 the young trees.

## Burn smart to prevent 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. They coordinate hundreds of burning requests from private and public forest landowners.

The Oregon Smoke Management Plan seeks to:

- Protect public health
- Minimize smoke intrusions into designated population areas
- Maximize burning opportunities while minimizing emissions
- Protect wilderness area visibility by avoiding main smoke plume impacts

Though smoke intrusions into populated areas occasionally occur due to changes in weather and wind conditions, ODF’s oversight of slash burning minimizes such occurrences.

## 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 typically occur, there won’t be the forest fuel available for 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 issuance of a permit. But if the airflow could carry 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 the landowner where, how much, and necessary spacing between individual burns in order to prevent smoke intrusions into populated areas.

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

## More stringent burning rules

Program reviews in 2007 and 2012 made important revisions to the Smoke Management Plan. These included:

- Broader coverage - The program was expanded to nearly all forestland statewide.
- More landowner responsibility - Landowners were charged with greater responsibility to prevent smoke intrusions into communities.
- Greater protection - The number of areas receiving extra protection from smoke impacts was doubled.



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, the high cost of transportation limits the cost-effectiveness of this option in many areas of the state. Other alternatives 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...

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