



Industrial forest management and the Holiday Farm Fire



Dylan Plummer

In the midst of a historic fire season that has left millions of acres burned, thousands of homes destroyed and dozens dead across the West, it is time for our community to start asking some tough questions, especially this one: What is driving the wildfires across the West to become more catastrophic with each passing year?

If you were to ask the timber industry and industry-friendly politicians about what's fueling these wildfires, they would argue that it is a lack of logging on our public lands. For years, this has been the dominant narrative — out-of-control wildfire is a product of too little logging, and come the end of fire season, the only thing to do is power up the chainsaws and level the trees to prevent them from burning.

Yet scientists tell a different story. Recent studies show that 'actively managed' forests — clear-cuts and timber plantations — actually burn hotter and faster than our fire-adapted native forests. While it comes as no surprise to find timber industry messaging is in opposition to science, this a step too far. Advocating for logging as a solution to wildfire despite the science that says otherwise is polluting the public discourse and putting our communities at risk — all for private profit.

Here in the southern Willamette Valley, the Holiday Farm Fire has burned over 170,000 acres, with over 75% of that being previously clear-cut industry land. So when the timber industry claims that the reason wildfires are becoming more severe is due to a lack of logging, and that we can beat wildfire with 'active forest management,' the facts on the ground clearly refute these claims.

For the residents of Thurston Hills, the Holiday Farm Fire makes this debate very real. After a years-long fight against a Seneca Jones clear-cut proposed by the Bureau of Land Management would have increased risks of wildfire to local homes, the Thurston Hills community was evacuated as the flames inched closer to their doorsteps. One can only imagine the emotions of rage and relief that these community members must have felt, knowing that if not for their hard work fighting the BLM and Seneca Jones, their homes could have very well burned to the ground.

While we all want an easy answer, there is no single cause for the recent mega-fires. We do know that the conditions were ripe to burn: high temperatures, low humidity, severe east winds and a surrounding landscape made up largely of cutover, flammable tree plantations. We also know that runaway climate change is going to exacerbate these types of cataclysmic events into the future.

Instead of digging ourselves deeper into this hole, we must heed the advice of the experts. We need to make massive investments into home hardening, which studies have shown can dramatically decrease the likelihood of structures catching fire, even while surrounded by roaring flames. We need to address our reliance on fossil fuels and mitigate runaway climate change. And finally, we need to demand accountability from the timber industry.

The vaporized clear-cuts within the Holiday Farm Fire perimeter will offer an opportunity to have a much needed conversation about the impacts of industrial forest management on community safety.

We cannot afford to wait until the next wildfire burns all the way to Springfield and Eugene.

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