



The definition of insanity

GUEST VIEW

By Timothy Ingalsbee

It's become a trite but true saying the definition of insanity is doing the same acts over and over yet expecting different results.

This is definitely the case with timber industry lobbyists stridently arguing for increased logging and firefighting on public lands.

Many people oppose the corporate looting of public lands, and that is why timber lobbyists can't openly admit their real objective — logging big trees for big profits — but instead mask their agenda behind Orwellian euphemisms and false promises.

They've repackaged logging as "active forest management" and "fuels reduction," and make outlandish claims that this will protect communities from wildfire, improve forest health, mitigate climate change, prevent smoke and even reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus!

Rampant clear-cutting of old-growth forests converted biologically rich, naturally fire-resilient native forests into highly flammable tree farms. While it takes a rare high-intensity fire to kill big old trees, low-intensity fires burn clear-cut timber plantations with catastrophic effects, leaving behind the proverbial "moonscape" of burned out stump craters and barren ash-covered slopes.

A good example would be the Douglas Complex in southern Oregon that spread across a landscape of private industrial tree farms intermixed with fragments of native forests on public lands. Scientists discovered that timber plantations burned far more severely compared to adjacent forest stands on public lands.

If the timber industry was truly interested in reducing hazardous fuel loads, it would start by thinning the overstocked tinderboxes of its monocrop. The premise that industrial forestry was "sustainable" was based on the gambit that wildfires could be excluded from flammable tree farms. Climate change is now increasing the frequency of severe weather conditions that drive large wildfires. Many existing tree farms will not survive to harvest age before future fires reduce them to ashes.

While timber lobbyists are trying their best to convince people that logging will restore forest health or reduce fire hazards, some people might be persuaded by arguments for ramping up backcountry firefighting to protect rural communities from wildfire. That would be another mistake. For years scientists have been saying that the best way to protect communities is to focus on reducing the ignitability of homes, not extinguishing fires in remote wildlands.

Conventional firefighting tactics developed in the 20th century are rapidly losing their efficacy in our 21st century climate. Firefighters cannot stop today's weatherdriven, fast-spreading fires, and the tiniest embers can soar over firelines to land on rooftops miles away to burn houses down. We've expended plenty of blood and treasure in the centurylong "war" against wildfire, but wildland firefighting becomes more futile and fatal each year.

Scientists have known for decades, as indigenous peoples have known for millennia, that healthy forests depend on the rejuvenating role of fire. Forests evolved with wildfire, and native peoples thrived with their use of fire on the land. We can do the same by relearning how to safely live with fire.

There are so many potential jobs, especially for young people and perhaps as part of a Green New Deal, in reducing home ignitability and improving fire resiliency, but these jobs will not require removing big logs.

The incessant propaganda from timber lobbyists promoting more logging and firefighting as the solution to the problems caused by past logging and firefighting can be summed up in a word: insanity.

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