Nothing recovers from massive timber grab

Dylan Plummer

Guest columnist The ferns were sprouting already. Green fronds poked out in stark contrast with the charred trees of the McKenzie watershed. Yet despite the signs of new life, it was difficult not to feel as though this watershed had been forever transformed as I walked through the blackened landscape. The verdant forests of stooped maples and ancient Douglas firs stretching towards the sun seemed lost in the blazes that burned across our state last September.

But I knew better.

The forests of Cascadia were born of fire, and have evolved in smoke and flame. As a group of ecologists, including Jerry Franklin, explain: 'Natural disturbances are key ecosystem processes rather than ecological disasters that require human repair.'

Left to their own devices, these forests can come back healthier than they were before the inferno.

And it’s not just the forests that are recovering. On my drive up Highway 126 earlier in the day, it was heartening to notice houses being rebuilt and to see the general buzz of activity as the community works to get back onto its feet. The loss of life and property in last year’s blaze was devastating, but the recovery efforts underway are a testament to the strength of will that defines this place and the people who live here.

But as I walked through the stands of blackened trunks to the crest of a hill, I received a harsh reminder that the majority of the burned forests would not be allowed to naturally regenerate. From where I stood, I could see the seemingly endless swaths of clear-cut operations stretched out on all sides, muddy and barren from the winter rains.

As I write this, we are witnessing what is likely the largest timber grab in the history of the McKenzie watershed, with tens of thousands of acres of forests being leveled within the span of a few months. And while our forests can recover from even the most severe wildfires — nothing can recover from this.

Post-fire clear-cutting is the most environmentally damaging form of logging, and while the industry touts its support for the communities impacted by the flames, it simultaneously puts them at greater risk of future wildfires, landslides, and impacts to drinking water quality with every clear-cut it carves into the burned landscape.

And the destruction isn’t just at the hands of private timber corporations. Recently, the Bureau of Land Management proposed over 1,500 acres of public land post-fire logging in the McKenzie watershed. Despite the best available science describing the myriad impacts that this would have on community safety, water quality and imperiled species habitat — not to mention the current glut of burned logs on the market making these projects unviable economically — the agency is ramming these sales through.

Driving home after a few hours spent up the McKenzie, I felt a strong sense of resolve. It’s far past time to reform state and federal forest policy to be based on community resiliency and ecology rather than extraction and private profit. It is time for our state and federal decision makers to demand the bold forest policy we need to protect our communities, our forests and our drinking water.

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