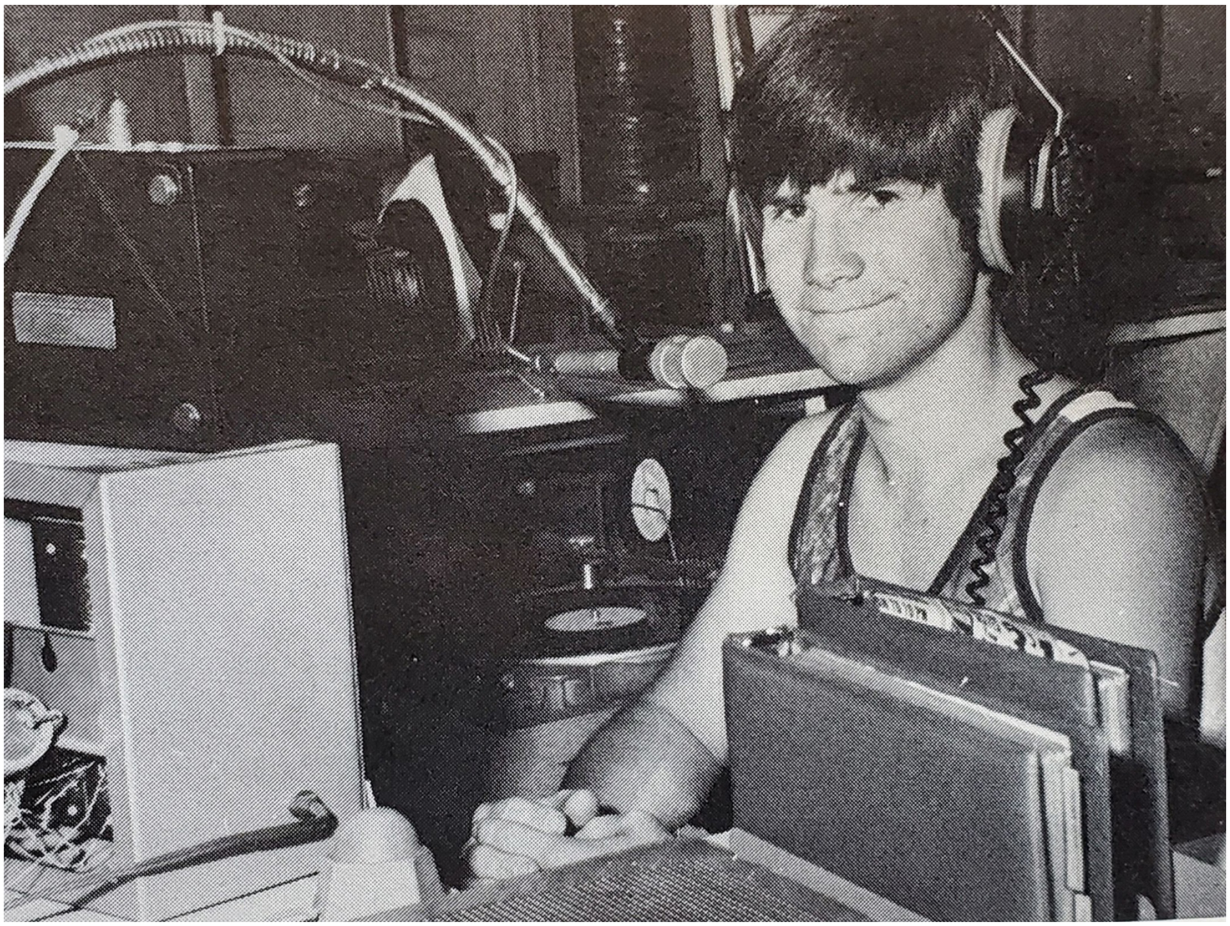
Conversations with Lars: Summer of '23 Smoke & Fire
Bob Zybach -- September 17, 2023 Final Draft

I've never met Lars Larson in person, but my first radio interview with him was about 20 years ago as I was finishing my graduate degree at Oregon State University. The questions likely had something to do with the Biscuit Fire at that time, or the Donato Study, which was in the news.

Since then we have had many more conversations on air, with discussions mostly focused on spotted owls, wildfires, forestry, or the Elliott State Forest. These are subjects of particular interest to me, and it's always a pleasure talking to Lars -- usually in nine-minute increments between commercials -- given his own knowledge of these topics.



Hey, Lars! *Larson was only a 16-year-old Junior at Tillamook High School when he began his broadcasting career, seven days a week, at "Mighty 1590" KTIL. He was hired and mentored by Mildred Davy, station manager, and paid $1.85 an hour working school nights from 10:00 PM to midnight, before closing the station; Saturdays, 7:00 PM to midnight; and 5:00 AM to 10:00 AM on Sundays. After graduation he briefly attended the University of Oregon and began picking up broadcasting jobs in Eugene and Portland. In 1997 he started hosting The Lars Larson Show at KXL in Portland, which expanded to the Northwest Network in 2000, and then syndicated nationally in 2003. Today the Northwest show is carried live from noon until 3:00 PM weekdays to an audience of a million listeners, followed by his national show from 3:00 to 6:00 PM to more than 100 affiliate stations and between four and five million listeners.*

Because of Lars' close familiarity with forestry, Northwest history, wildfires, and wildlife, his interviews are more like discussions or conversations than typical interviews. For that reason I decided to use the transcript from our recorded July 28, 2014 talk as the basis for an article/editorial in this series. The topic was the ever-increasing severity, frequency, and extent of Oregon catastrophic wildfires -- as I had been clearly predicting for many years -- and "climate change" as a possible cause. The article appeared in the Fall 2014 issue of this magazine, titled "Global Warming and Oregon Wildfire History," and was generally well received.

Unfortunately, my predictions of increasingly common and greater wildfires, due to the passive and ever-increasing federal regulations guiding the management of our public forests, continued to prove accurate. The fire seasons of 2015, 2017, and 2020 were deadly to both people and wildlife, killed millions of acres of trees, including much old-growth, and took place in only six years. It was decided that an updating and reprinting of the 2014 article and transcript would be timely, so "Part II. History Repeats Itself, Again" of the "Global Warming and Oregon Fire History" saga was published in the Spring 2022 issue.

This summer I had wildfire-related conversations with Lars on two of his shows. In July we discussed the smoke from Canadian wildfires polluting US air, and in August the topic was the deadly fire in Hawaii. Audio recordings of both interviews were critically well received by several national and regional experts in wildfire management and mitigation, and I decided to resurrect the 2014 format for this article.

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The past weekend, in early September, was the first time I have ever talked with Lars and not had our conversation broadcast to tens or hundreds of thousands of his listeners. How come he knows so much about forestry and wildfires and wildlife, anyway? I've listened to him for nearly 40 years on television and the radio and had some idea, but not much.

And though I have never met Lars in person, I learned I must have met his father, Waldo Larson, when we were both extras on the set of "Paint Your Wagon" in the summer of 1968. The movie was shot in the Wallowa Mountains near Baker Oregon and starred Lee Marvin, Jean Seberg, and Clint Eastwood. There were about 60 or 80 of us "atmosphere" on set daily and in costume for months, but we were different generations: very familiar and friendly on sight; separate groups of associates during breaks and when otherwise not working.

Waldo was about my father's age, and they both served in the Navy in the South Pacific during WW II, Waldo in submarines and Dad aboard ship. Also, Waldo continued in the Navy after the war ended and served a full 20 years. In 1954 he married retired Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Harriet Mills, who had served as a nurse during the war. The couple was married in San Francisco, but had relocated to Taipei, Taiwan by the time Lars was born in 1959. Navy families move a lot.

Waldo Larson served in the Navy for 20 years before getting a degree in Forestry and completing his career as a Park Ranger at Cape Lookout State Park near Tillamook. His passion and hobby, though, was as an extra in Hollywood films, beginning in 1968 and continuing after his retirement. By 1993 he had appeared in 22 different films, including "Silverado," "Pale Rider," "Red Dawn" and "Stand by Me." This photo is from his role as a character also named "Waldo," in the Johnny Depp movie, "Benny & Joon." The movie-Waldo was a clean-up man in Benny's (Aidan Quinn) garage, where he was interviewed on-set by The Seattle Times in 1993: "I've been in a bunch of westerns where I play an old sheepherder or an old drunken cowboy. I'm real good at falling off bar stools. That's one of my specialties."

Waldo retired from the service in 1961 and the young family moved to Montana so he could attend forestry school. To make ends meet they lived in a small cabin with an outhouse while Waldo attended classes at the University of Montana, and in a lookout tower for three summers, where he was seasonally employed by the US Forest Service. After graduation and a short stint as a National Park Service Ranger at Mt. Glacier and then Mt. Ranier, the family moved from Somes Bar to Happy Camp, and then Dorris in the deep woods of northern California, where Lars attended grade schools and Waldo worked as a forester.

From Dorris, on the Oregon border, the family moved to nearby Klamath Falls. On the night of December 31, 1969 their car was struck by a drunken driver. Lars was mostly okay, but Harriet had been killed and his father was seriously injured. The family returned to Montana and lived with relatives while he healed.

A year or so later, when he was able, Waldo returned to Klamath Falls, where he worked in a sawmill and Lars finished the 6th Grade. Then he got a job as an Oregon State Park Ranger,

based in Tillamook, and Lars went to Junior High School, and then High School, where he became a skilled debater, a proud Cheesemaker, and began his broadcasting career.

Larson estimates that he shot "about a dozen bucks and a dozen bull elk with a rifle," but this is his first deer with a compound bow. The photo is from late summer 2018 near Terrebonne, with Smith Rock in the background. Since then he has tagged a second buck with a bow.

July 7, 2023: SMOKE

Lars: Welcome back to the Lars Larson Show, it's a pleasure to be with you, and I'm always glad to get to your phone calls and your emails. On this First Amendment Friday, we celebrate your first amendment rights of free speech, free expression, and the right to associate with anyone you want to associate with.

Now, I want to ask you about this. You've seen what happened when wildfire smoke got into New York City and all of a sudden, the elites were breathing that orange air, and you've seen the same kind of thing happen this year in Seattle, they're breathing smoky air as well. And in

recent history in the Pacific Northwest, we've seen plenty of occasions where the smoke went on for weeks and weeks and weeks.

So, the perfect guy to talk to, the man who usually doesn't get interviewed by the mainstream media, is the guy who knows the subject very well. Dr. Bob Zybach, forest scientist, president of Northwest Maps Company, and the author of *The Great Fires: Indian Burning and Catastrophic Forest Fire Patterns of the Oregon Coast Range, 1491 to 1951*. It covers quite a span. Dr. Zybach, welcome back.

Bob: Well, thank you, Lars. It's good to be back.

New York, New York, July 7, 2023. Photo by Anthony Quintano, Creative Commons.

Lars: I'm glad to have you here because I want you to prepare my audience. I know this summer we're likely to get even more smoke in the Pacific Northwest. We're going to have fires. We've gone from the 30-year period you talk about frequently from I think the mid-fifties to the mid-eighties where we had essentially no large fires in the forest. Thirty years of no large fires at all, and now routinely half a million acres burn in Oregon. Half a million acres I think, on an average year burn in Washington, and we'll expect to have fires this year as well. And I know to

a fair certainty, the people in charge are going to say, "Yep, it's all evidence of global warming." Help prepare them with some answers for those people who say those things to them.

Bob: Well, it's all due to fuels and weather. Global warming hasn't happened here, so it can't be global warming. We've got the same weather we've had for centuries. Fire season is the problem. East winds are the danger. So with the Labor Day Fires three years ago, we had east winds in early September, so we had massive fires.

The real problem is managing the fuels. From '52 to '87 we had one major fire, on the Smith River in 1966. It was 40,000 acres. So that's 30 some years with one major fire. It doesn't even compare to the Labor Day Fires -- on one day, where close to a million acres burned. The Coast Range doesn't get lightning; Southwest Oregon gets lightning but doesn't have a lot of people; and the Western Cascades gets lightning and has a lot of people. So once we get a heavy east wind, assuming we do, ignition can come from lightning or people and large fires are the result. And largely because of the massive fuel buildups on federal lands over the last 35 years.

Lars: Dr. Zybach, there's one thing I hear the media do constantly and they say, "Wildfires get worse during hot times." Is there anything about a day being either 80-degrees or 105-degrees that makes a difference in terms of fire?

Bob: It's the east wind. You can have an 80-degree or 105-degree fire; maybe at 105 degrees, depending on fuel moisture, you could have a cleaner burn and easier to control by that measure, but it depends. The fire will create its own wind, will create its own weather. They can even create thunderstorms, the big fires. But an east wind is the constant element that goes with all the major fires in Western Oregon over the last few hundred years.

Lars: So when you see these fires, you've studied this subject, you studied 500 years of it, 1491 to 1951. Are there ways to get on top of this problem where we could prevent these fires instead of merely trying to put them out every year and usually succeeding only to the extent that we contain them to half a million acres; instead of maybe 10 or 20,000 acres a year on an average year in that period you documented from the fifties to the eighties?

Bob: Yes, and it would be the same thing. It would be active management. Right now, the Forest Service and BLM are planning to leave all the snags and large woody debris. Jerry Franklin says a sign of a healthy forest is a lot of dead trees. That'd be like saying a sign of a healthy city is a lot of dead people. It doesn't make sense. That's not healthy. It's a fuel and it's dangerous.

So we used to harvest snags, dead trees, focus on it. We used to maintain the roads and trails and keep them open. We used to have local employment where local people that knew the roads and the land and the animals were the ones that were doing the logging and the tree planting and so on. And so we didn't have fires. So we know how to mitigate these fires and that's why they're so predictable.

Like myself and others in the early nineties said, "If we create these LSRs and other government acronyms, we're going to have massive wildfires and they're going to kill wildlife and some people, destroy homes, and it's going to be at a cost to rural communities that lose the work associated with forest management." So we know how to fix the problem. We just don't.

Lars: I'm just curious, do you have any insights as to why the people who followed you in forest science, I mean you've been in forest science for decades, why the people who are now coming into it seem to think that forests that burn on a regular basis or forests with lots of dead fuel on the forest floor are a healthy forest? Why the change?

Bob: Well, indoctrination. Eisenhower warned us that the government will get big computers and put independent scientists out of business. And essentially, if you cut to the chase, it's anti-logging activists. A lot of people in the eighties and nineties thought that clearcutting was an evil. And so they picked spotted owls and marbled murrelets and coho as animals that they claimed -- erroneously, still erroneously -- were harmed directly by clearcutting, and got the lawyers in Washington DC and the lawyers on the ground to pursue that. And they've been very, very successful. And wildfires are the predictable result.

Lars: I guess what frustrates me Dr. Zybach, is that most of the forests that have burned are not on the private lands. It's not Weyerhaeuser's, not the private companies like Hampton. It's the public lands, the state lands, the federal lands, the BLM Lands, county lands, and that we're passing up a gigantic opportunity to harvest billions, hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of trees and make jobs and everything else. And you could do it at a rate that's sustainable, meaning you just keep planting trees and you never run out of trees. Am I wrong to think of it that way?

Bob: No. We demonstrated that was right. They probably would do things in the seventies and eighties that we wouldn't do now, but it's a matter of modifying what works rather than abandoning it. And that's what's happened. And that's another argument why this isn't global warming. Is it only global warming on federal lands where all the fires are happening and not happening on Indian lands and private lands? Well, it's global. So that argument is out the window. It's total mismanagement. It was predicted from the beginning, and they're making the situation worse by not salvaging the snags and dead wood that has been the results of these fires since the 1990s, but certainly since 2017 and 2020.

August 14, 2023: FIRE

Lars: Welcome back to the Lars Larson Show. It's a Tuesday. It's the Radio Northwest Network, and it's my pleasure to be with you. And now we have the deadliest fire in US history in Maui and northwest communities under evacuation orders from wildfires. What has put us in this spot and how do we get out of it?

There are actually some sensible solutions and even some that might even involve making money and making jobs. We'll talk about it with Dr. Bob Zybach, who's a forest scientist. You've heard him on the program before, president of Northwest Maps Company and author of *The Great Fires: Indian Burning and the Catastrophic Forest Fire Patterns of the Oregon Coast Range.* Doctor, welcome back.

Bob: Hi, Lars. Good to be back.

Maui, Hawaii, August 10, 2023. Photo by Patrick T. Fallon, Getty Images.

Lars: I want to get your take initially about what happened in Maui because we're now starting to see not just where the blame may go to power lines or other conditions like that, but almost everybody on the left politically says, oh, this is all about climate change. This is something that's come on us because human beings use too many fossil fuels. Any truth to that?

Bob: None. It has got nothing to do with climate change. Everything to do with housing, exotic weeds, in the case of Hawaii; which is similar to Paradise and similar to the Almeda Drive fire in that weeds and housing that were very close together formed the primary fuels and in all three cases were deadly. People died because of the speed in which the fire moved.

Lars: Well, and weeds in the case -- I know when people hear weeds, they say well, everybody has weeds, but is it worse in places like Maui? Because as I understand, that used to be a big area for growing sugar cane and then sugar cane has gone away to a large extent, and as a result, there's a bunch of land that's not very well tended but it could be, couldn't it?

Bob: Yeah, and it's the same thing. Almeda Drive was weeds. They created a "Greenway", and it grew up in blackberries, and those blackberries are real volatile when they die and form a

canopy, and that's what happened there; that and a lot of trailer houses and a lot of weeds. In Hawaii it was weeds that grew up in the agricultural areas that had been abandoned or converted to housing and then the housing is essentially dead trees. It's dried lumber that's built the houses, and if they're close together, there's no way to make them "Fire Safe." Each house is fuel for the adjacent house.

Lars: And is part of the problem that in Lahaina especially, they called the place historic. It had a lot of buildings that went back before modern building codes. If they had said, well, even without building codes, we have to do something to keep these houses if one catches fire from spreading to the next one. This was all foreseeable and preventable. Am I wrong?

Bob: No, that's exactly right. When we find -- a wind will whip up in different directions. Here in Western Oregon, it's from the east, and in Hawaii, I'm guessing it might be from any direction -- but when weeds and fuels, volatile fuels, are adjacent to flammable buildings where people live, it's a risk and we're seeing the results of that risk.

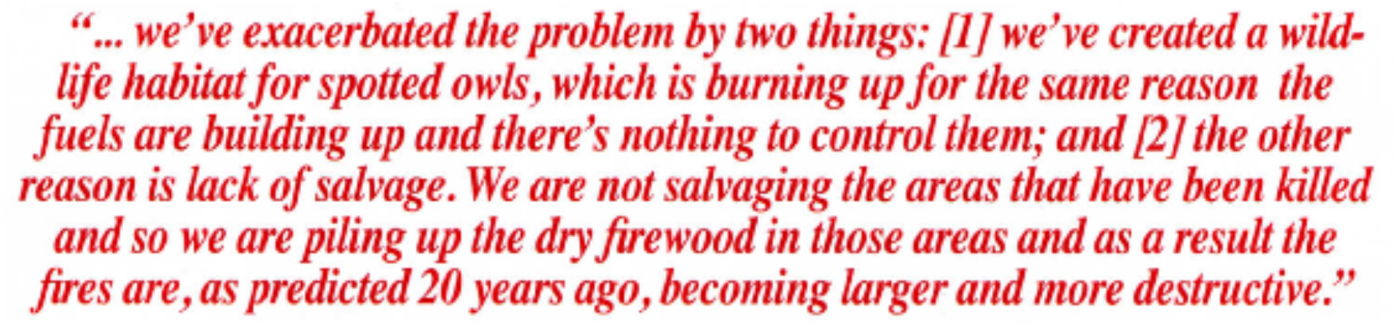
Lars: Now, what about the Northwest communities? We've got a bunch of communities that they've gone to evacuation, mandatory evacuation. Are those also evidence that we're not managing the forest and the wildlands very well and we could be?

Bob: We're doing a terrible job there. These fires were predictable for the last 30 years. If we look at the Flat Fire right now, the heat isn't a real problem. It means fuels burn cleaner and faster. But if a wind comes up, if a Chetco Wind comes up, an east wind comes up, we're asking for another Silver Complex or Chetco Bar Fire, just a real disaster. And the way we can tell that is the Flat Fire. It's well contained at about 33,000 acres that used to be called a major fire 20 years ago. Now it's got to be a hundred thousand acres to be a major fire, but you look at the photos and it's completely surrounded by snags from earlier fires. So these fires are just fueling future fires just like the Tillamook Fires in the 1930s and '40s did. And it wasn't until we removed the snags, took out the fuels and actively managed that land that we were able to create Tillamook Forest, and we've got the same problem in Curry County. They're just allowing the snags to remain in place and fuel the next fire, and it's been going on since 1987.

Lars: I'm talking to Dr. Bob Zybach, who's a forest scientist and the president of Northwest Maps. The other thing is they don't just allow the snags to stay there. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the "Greeny Groups" say, "No, you will not go in and salvage log. No, you will not take down those snags. That's part of Mother Nature. We have to leave it there." And they insist on leaving it there and not clearing the fuel and not replanting. I've seen that demand a number of times. And they could actually do that, and maybe even make the money to pay the cost of doing the replanting, couldn't they?

Bob: Sure. We did that for 30 or 40 years. When we studied the Tillamook, we figured out if we salvage this material, we're making money, we're paying taxes, we're training people, we're keeping access roads open. And so from '52 until '87, we had one major fire, one fire in excess

of 10,000 acres in Western Oregon. Now we have a fire that big right now that we're holding and calling contained, or 56% contained. So it's a problem that's become exacerbated through mismanagement of our federal lands specifically, but now that's being transferred over to our private and state lands as well. The Elliott State Forest, they have no plan to harvest any snags, so it's just asking for a disaster at some future point.



This quote is excerpted from The Lars Larson Show, July 28, 2014 transcript and was highlighted in the 2014 and 2022 "Global Warming and Oregon Fire History" articles described in the text.

Lars: And by the way, the Elliott State Forest is an issue you've been dogging for a long time. Correct me if I'm wrong, that forest used to spin off tens of millions of dollars for schools in Oregon. It now spins off no money, it just costs money, and yet nothing has changed. The trees are still there to make the money from. It's just the attitude about logging has changed and they say we don't want to log. We don't want to make money from the Elliot Forest. We just want to set it up, I guess, to burn down at some point.

Bob: It's really sad. There's 400 jobs that should be going on there. It produced tens of millions for our schools. It was created as our first State Forest specifically to fund our schools, and now taxpayers are paying for lawyers and "researchers" -- I'm going to put quotes around it -- to let it lie fallow and develop into an increasing wildfire risk. It's burned severely several times, and now they've got somebody counting tree rings and saying that that's their fire history; whereas Jerry Phillips and myself and other people have developed really detailed fire histories showing exactly what the risk is to the communities, to the west of Elliott, and yet they're growing snags there just like on the federal lands.

Lars: Dr. Zybach, you may have better numbers than I, but the last time I looked up the average fires in the last 10 or 20 years, it comes out to about a half a million acres in Oregon a year and a half a million in Washington. I believe that's the number. And then when we have a big fire year, we get a million acres burned. That is compared to the 35 years you talked about where we had one fire bigger than 10,000 acres and nothing else in the way of major fires for 35 years.

Bob: Yep. The Labor Day fires, we had nearly a million acres burn at one point. The Tillamook Fires every six years were burning a hundred thousand to 300,000 acres, and those were the lone events, but from '52 to '87, one fire in excess of 10,000 acres. The others were put out and

maintained, managed, and lots of jobs and our communities and schools and parks were doing very well.

Lars: Well, for your lips to the politician's ears because somebody has to change the thinking on this, otherwise it won't be global warming. It'll just be our fire . . . our forests are going to burn on a regular basis. Every year, we're going to lose a half a million acres, and then we're not going to go in and clear it off and get the fuels out and salvage what we can. We're just going to set it up for the next fire.

Dr. Bob Zybach is a forest scientist. We're glad to call on him. I wish we had more forest scientists like that right now, and maybe if we did and some of that thinking in politicians in the northwest, we'd stop these fires. Instead, it's just become a regular occurrence and they always blame it on global warming.