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The real cost of wildfires

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[Galen Barnett, The Oregonian](#)

By



THE OREGONIAN Lights from emergency vehicles mix with the glow of a wildfire west of Mosier in August.

The tab for U.S. wildfires as commonly reported by the news media is only a fraction of the full costs experienced by the public.

Darrel Kenops' recent commentary in The Oregonian ("Balancing protection with beneficial use," Aug. 25) makes the point that we export our environmental impacts to international destinations when we cannot find ways to locally meet our nation's needs for forest products. Excellent point. But lost in this discussion are the year-in-and-year-out costs that citizens must bear each time a wildfire scorches mile after square mile of Oregon's forests.

Real costs for wildfires are stupendous and insidiously invisible. It isn't just the billion dollars or more diverted each year from other useful programs in federal and state budgets to stamp out fires as typically reported by the media. Most expenses are never assigned to the bottom-line costs of wildfire.

For example, less tangible values such as damaged wildlife habitat, degraded soil and lost recreational opportunities are difficult to value monetarily; yet, these are greatly valued by the public, as are clean air, clean water and beautiful scenery.

With co-authors Michael Dubrasich, Gregory Benner and John Marker, we have published a one-page [checklist](#) of real costs that also should be tallied when the news media covers wildfire.

On this list are property costs, including damage to federal, state, private, utility and municipal facilities; public health, including asthma, emphysema and coronary disease; indirect firefighting costs, including crew training, equipment and inventories of supplies; and post-fire costs, including timber, agriculture and home losses. The checklist goes on to detail air and atmospheric, soil-related, recreation, aesthetic and energy effects, plus the loss of cultural and historic resources.

We estimate that, nationwide, the true costs of wildfire, over and above seasonal fire-fighting expenses, range between \$20 billion and \$100 billion a year -- or between ten to fifty times what is typically reported to simply put out fires.

So what can be done? There are those who think that passive management of our publicly-owned forests is the correct path: those that espouse the "naturally functioning ecosystem" and "let-it-burn" school of forest management.

I doubt the public has much appetite for the kind of fires that occurred in the past, as described by Kenops, before we began excluding fire from the landscape. The massive fires of the past - extinguished only when winter weather arrived - are not acceptable today. Also not acceptable is the status quo. In effect, public policy for the past 20 years has been to fight nearly every fire that ignites, yet do nothing to manage the consequences of insect-infested, diseased, wind-thrown and overstocked forestlands.

There are successfully tested alternatives to passive management. Actively removing excess woody biomass, thinning stands of trees for beneficial use, and selectively employing prescribed fire are among them. These activities all have costs but some can be done profitably: creating long-term jobs, reducing risks for severe fire, beautifying our forests, protecting our resources, and offsetting our international dependence on energy and forest products.

These activities will have their own environmental impacts. But then, so does doing nothing. And, in

the long haul, doing nothing is proving to be much, much more expensive.

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