



Dollar Lake: Understanding the full costs of wildfire

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By **Guest Columnist**

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Two years ago, The Oregonian printed a column I wrote that summarized a paper written and published online by three coauthors and myself. The piece, titled "**The Real Cost of Wildfires,**" reported our findings that large-scale wildfires in the US typically result in ten to 50 times more costs and damages than suppression costs:

That is, forest wildfires in the US have typically cost US citizens \$50 billion to \$100 billion – or more – annually for the past several years.



Rick Bowmer/The Associated Press/File

The Dollar Lake fire.

If the Dollar Lake Fire had reached (or does reach) the BPA transmission lines or the Bull Run watershed, it will easily cause significantly more damage than just its suppression costs. Such damages can be readily understood by people in Texas, Arizona, San Diego, and Sisters, Oregon, that have had first hand experiences with property damage, polluted air, degraded soils, personal health problems, destroyed wildlife habitat and other problems caused by forest wildfires.

Ken Snell, the USFS regional director of fire, fuels, and aviation management was quoted by The Oregonian as saying "a large fire on the Bull Run will come in time." Snell is correct. Whether that time is ten days or ten years from now, it is a certainty. Annual growth in the forested watershed leads to a continuous increase in fuels that must either be managed by people or else consumed by flames. Those are the only options, and since fuel management was legally halted in the Bull Run more than 10 years ago, that leaves only fire to clean up the mess.

Two weeks ago, on Sept. 7, one of my co-authors, Mike Dubrasich, and I presented the same paper to the Oregon Board of Forestry in Lakeview. The Dollar Lake fire was part of the resulting discussion. Our point was that an economic analysis of potential wildfire losses is best made before these predictable events occur, so that affected communities, landowners, foresters and wildfire managers can make better-informed decisions when they do take place.

The focus of our paper is a **one-page checklist of possible costs and damages** associated with wildfires. Anyone can use this checklist to consider the harm that will be done when wildfire ultimately does affect BPA's power transmissions and Portland's water supplies.

One can hope the Dollar Lake fire will become a wake-up call to Portland residents who value fresh water, clean air, cheap electricity, native wildlife and forest recreational opportunities that are being degraded or put at risk by current forest and wildfire management policies. Our checklist provides a good first step in considering these values and the types of actions that can be taken to protect them for ourselves and for future generations.

Bob Zybach writes from Cottage Grove.

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