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Scientist: Forest conditions spell danger

By Scott Swanson
Of The New Era

Some day a very, very bad fire may sweep out of the east and burn toward Sweet Home.

The catastrophic wildfire could torch thousands of acres of thick Douglas fir forests in the Willamette National Forest. If it comes, it will likely be down the Middle Santiam River corridor from the Quartzville area, with sparks and embers advancing as far as six miles ahead of the main blaze. It could be so hot that trees and homes in its path will

go up in flames from spontaneous combustion.

The question is whether that fire would reach Sweet Home – or other area communities located near thick national forestlands.

Bob Zyback predicts that the possibility is high.

Zyback is a former reforestation contractor who earned a Ph.D. in 2003 from Oregon State University, studying catastrophic wildfire history in western Oregon. He has spent the summer studying the South Santiam and Blue River headwaters on con-

tract from the Grand Ronde Indian nation. His 80-page report on how the forests were used by Santiam Molalla Indians between 1750 and 1850, before white settlers began arriving in droves, is going through peer review by other scientists and experts, and he will speak on some of his findings to the South Santiam Watershed Council tonight at the Lebanon Senior Center.

He said he plans to focus on the difference between the ways the Kalapuya and Molalla tribes used the forest for commercial purposes and

how those uses have changed since white settlement.

“The history of land use will be the main theme and I’ll talk about how that is reflected in water quality and fish numbers,” he said.

Zyback, 59, was born into a family of loggers, though his father owned a tavern. He started planting trees as a schoolboy in the Tillamook Burn 45 years ago and later ran Phoenix Reforestation Inc. in Western Oregon for some 20 years that was the subject

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of an Inc. Magazine in 1982.

"My crews did about 80,000 acres of reforestation and I personally planted over 2 million trees," he said. "How did I become unemployed? Through spotted owl science. I got replaced with illegal aliens."

When his company went under in 1992, Zyback decided to go back to school.

"I think it was a combination of self-righteousness and frustration and a lack of opportunity," he said. "The self-righteous part was that I thought 'these guys are just poorly informed. I'll just go give them a few facts and help them get things back on track.' I got into this to keep things from getting farther out of hand."

He says he soon learned otherwise, but earned a master's degree in 1999 and a Ph.D in 2003.

He has been involved in a wide variety of studies since then and runs a company called Northwest Maps, through which he does consulting work, political opinions and scientific research and communication. He also has been program manager for Oregon Watersheds and Websites Inc., which offers on-line tools for the learning about and stewardship of Oregon's watershed resources.

Zyback says his research in the study for the Grand Ronde and other projects has consistently led him to conclude that Indians did manage the forests, including setting fires to thin them, and that current practices by the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies are setting up communities such as Sweet Home for disaster.

"The important thing that people in Washington D.C. need to know is that the forests to the east of Sweet Home have deteriorated significantly in the last 50 years and created an extreme wildfire risk to rural and urban residents in the Sweet Home area," he said in an interview last week.

He cited the example of the 1936 forest fire that leveled Bandon.

"This Scottish guy brought Scotch broom and gorse to Bandon, and in 1936 the whole town burst into flames because of the gorse that had proliferated in area," Zyback said. "Here, the problem is Douglas fir."



Photo by Scott Swanson

Bob Zyback shows materials – maps and an old U.S. Forest Service report on the Willamette National Forest – that he used in his study of how local forests were used prior to the arrival of white settlers.

He said Douglas fir rapidly invades abandoned fields, meadows and understories, forming pitchy, highly flammable canopy. The firs shade other trees and compete with other plants in the understory, the shaded areas of the forest, and create contiguous, pitchy fuel.

One positive for Sweet Home in the post-spotted owl cessation of most national forest logging is that the town is surrounded by a buffer of privately owned land, chiefly managed by Cascade Timber Consultants, he said.

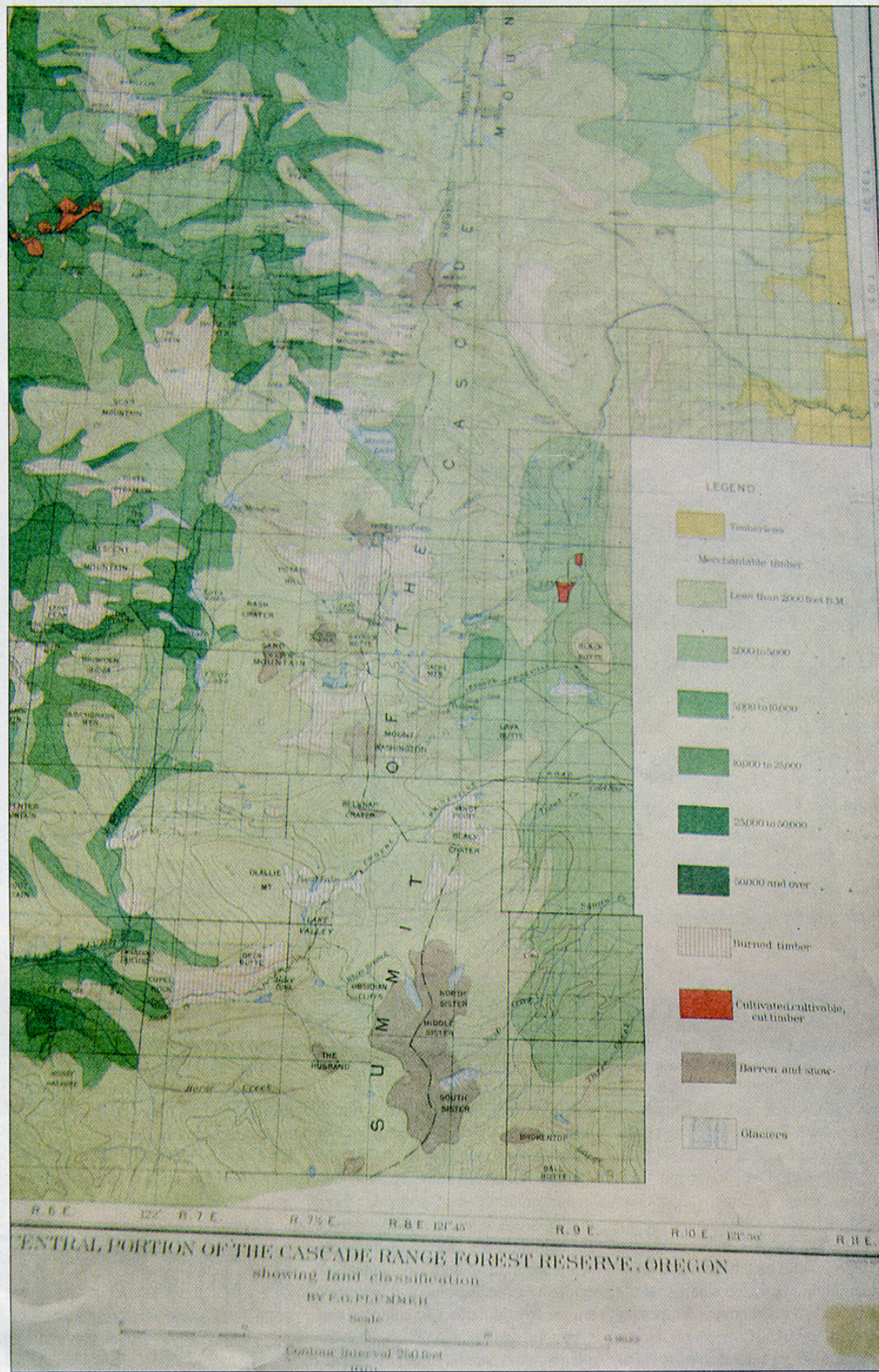
"One of the advantages of having private land between Sweet Home and the Forest Service is that private land is managing roads and

fuel loads," Zyback said. "That creates a degree of safety. That's a huge advantage."

Zyback said he has worked with the Forest Service in the past and knows some of the local workers, but he has little faith in the way the agency is managing the forest today.

"I would say that the last 10 years has been marked by the most costly, most destructive period of U.S. Forest Service land management in the United States," he said. "We spend a billion and a half (dollars) a year in firefighting costs and the actual loss of homes and resources has been tens of millions in taxpayer dollars."

"We're burning up our forests and going up to Canada for green



This 1901 map, one of those referenced by Bob Zyback in his study for the Grand Ronde tribe, shows forest fire damage and the state of the forests at the turn of the century east of present-day Sweet Home.

wood. That's good for Weyerhaeuser, but bad for the rest of us."

Locally, he said, he sees little evidence that roads need to be closed to the public, which Forest Service officials have announced will be necessary in the coming months.

Zyback said he and a colleague did extensive study, documented by photos and GPS readings, over a 200,000-acre area in the Willamette and Deschutes national forests over the past two years. He said that road conditions are a huge problem in the forest as well as overgrowth, but not from public use. He said he has seen little evidence of all-terrain vehicles doing significant damage to the roads and trails in most of that area.

"We documented only two damaged areas, one on private land on the Calapooia River and the other on Forest Service land – the Santiam Wagon Road – where damage was done by off-road vehicle people around the Sand Mountain Area. The people there told us the Forest Service had told them to use that area.

"We found dozens of other roads impassable by shoddy maintenance by the Forest Service."

He said he believes the key to improving forest conditions is to do salvage logging and re-introduce

regular burning, such as was practiced by the Indians, by restoring meadows and prairies, ridge lines that are now clogged with trees, and competing vegetation that pose a threat to old-growth forests.

"If we do that, we will protect the old growth and generate hundreds of millions of dollars of income because most of the fuel is called Douglas fir," he said. "I make the prediction that this will produce hundreds of real, year-round jobs – not illegal alien jobs – through maintenance and fire setting. This is actual stewardship."

He said other keys are removing dead wood, which he said is not "a normal part," from restored meadows and prairies and maintaining existing roads and trails.

"Then you've got steady employment and regular income to pay for it," he said. "You also have reduced risk to wildlife and human populations."

The South Santiam Watershed Council will meet tonight, Nov. 28, at the Lebanon Senior Center, located at 65 Academy "B" St.

Bob Zybach's presentation will begin at 7 p.m. The council Board of Directors will meet at 6 p.m., and that meeting is also open to the public.