Fire, Thinning, and the Wildlands/Urban Interface In the Polallie-Cooper Timber Sales

The Polallie-Cooper Logging Project is divided into three sales: Clan, Kilt, and Tartan. Clan and Kilt are west of Highway 35 and surround the Cooper Spur Ski Area. Tartan is east of Highway 35.

How much of Clan and Kilt is really about fire risk in the Wildlands/Urban interface? The Clan and Kilt Timber Sales would result in the logging of 445 acres. The Forest Service's stated goal of reducing the risk of fire in the Wildlands/Urban interface encompasses only 94 acres of this logging (just ***21% of the sales***). The Forest Service justifies the rest of the Clan and Kilt sales through visual improvements and forest health.

Canopy of the Kilt Sale of Polallie Cooper Project. After this canopy is "extensively thinned," much more light will be able to reach the forest floor, allowing heat and light to dry up bushes, branches and small trees, actually increasing the fire risk.

Commercial Logging & Catastrophic Wildfire: Solution or Cause?

The Forest Service has proposed extensive commercial thinning of the Wildlands/Urban interface in the Clan and Kilt timber sales. However, many of our nation's leading forests biologists have consistently found that commercially logged and roaded areas are far more likely to burn than unlogged areas. Commercial logging often increases the fuel load on the forest floor, both by the slash, needles and branches left behind by logging operations, and through changes to forest structures. Thinning decreases the canopy coverage, allowing heat and light more access to the forest floor and drying up bushes, branches and small trees. This accumulation of dried fuel results in "faster fire spread, greater flame length, and more erratic shifts in the speed and direction of fires."

Logging and roadbuilding are major cause of severe wildfire. For example, slash left behind after logging operations can increase the severity and speed of forest fires for up to 30 years.

"In the short term, **all harvest areas would have an increased potential for ground-based fires** due to the increase of branches and other fine fuels left on-site after logging. These ground based fires could produce crown fires in surrounding stands due to increased heat"
- Polallie-Cooper Environmental Assessment on post-logging fire risk (pg 58).

BARK
www.bark-out.org (503) 331-0374 info@bark-out.org

Should Commercial Timber Sales be used for Fire Management?

Current scientific knowledge does not support commercial logging as a tool for fire risk control but rather as a common cause of increased fire risk. However, there is a belief in the scientific field that pre-commercial thinning of small diameter trees when combined with prescribed burns may be an effective way to manage fire-risk reduction. Most of the trees that could be removed to reduce fire risk in the Wildlands/Urban interfaces are small diameter with little or no commercial value. These are not the trees generally targeted by the commercial timber sale program.

Fire management under the commercial timber sale program has a tendency to target the ecosystems and trees that forest biologists and fire ecologists have found most important in maintaining or creating "fire-safe" forests in the Wildlands/Urban interface. Fire management projects without a commercial incentive would have far more credibility in scientifically based fire risk reduction.

These trees are marked to cut as part of extensive thinning of the Wildlands/Urban interface in the Polallie Cooper Timber Sales. Removing these fire resistant old douglas fir trees will not reduce fire risk. This is an example of the forest service removing more trees than necessary in a commercial timber sale under the banner of fire prevention.

According to the Sierra Nevada Project, in a report commissioned and funded by Congress: *"Timber harvest, through its effects on forest structures, local microclimate, and fuels accumulation, has increased fire severity more than any other human activity."*

According to the General Accounting Office, the Forest Service's fire risk reduction timber sales consistently "(1) focus on areas with high-value commercial timber rather than on areas with high fire hazards or (2) include more large, commercially valuable trees in a timber sale than are necessary to reduce the accumulated fuel."

FIRE-SAFE FORESTS: "In 'fire-safe' forests, fires can burn with low fire intensity, trees are fire-resistant by virtue of their diameter and species, and there is a low probability that crown fires will spread through the forest." *-testimony given to the subcommittee on Forests and Forests Health in the House of Representatives by Professors Morgan, Neuenschwander, and Swetnam, researchers in fire ecology and fire management.*

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Many of the forest ecosystems we depend on for clean air and water are naturally dependent on fire. Fire is a natural part of the west. We can't fire-proof our forests. Extensively thinning areas often increases fire risk. Logged and roaded areas are those most likely to burn. Complete fire suppression is neither realistic nor desirable. While we can't fire-proof our forests, we can make our Wildlands/Urban interface as "Fire-Safe" as possible.

Shown in the picture above, portions of the Clan and Kilt sales consist of dense lodgepole pine. Lodgepole pines are a fire dependent species. Fire melts the coating of lodgepole pine cones allowing the pines to be the first to reoccur after stand replacing fire. Lodgepole pine are naturally replaced by spruce and fir if a stand replacing fire does not first recreate the cycle, as seen in the Polalie-Cooper stands. Neither clear-cutting nor extensively thinning this area will replace the natural fire regime or significantly reduce the risk of home loss from fire.

What is the "Wildlands/Urban interface"?

"The Wildlands/Urban interface refers specifically to area where forests meet urban development, particularly houses. There is general agreement that the Wildlands/Urban interface is primarily within 60-200 feet of houses. Fences, power lines, trails, roads, and properties with no buildings do not on their own constitute Wildlands/Urban interface areas." - Wildfire, Natural Part of the American West.

"The evidence suggests that wildland fuel reduction for reducing home losses may be inefficient and ineffective. Inefficient because wildland fuel reduction for several hundred meters or more is greater than necessary for reducing ignitions from flames. Ineffective because it does not sufficiently reduce fireband ignitions."
- Forest Service Report, "Reducing the Wildland Fire threat to Homes" by Jack Cohen

The most important action you can take to protect your home is to create a safe zone of at least 40 yards around any structures by removing anything that can serve as fuel for fire.

- Clean and inspect your chimney at least once a year.
- Use fire-resistant building materials such as metal or slate when building or remodeling, particularly for your roof or shutters.
- Keep a garden hose that is long enough to reach any area of your home and any other structures on your property.
- Clean your roof and gutters regularly.
- Landscape your property with fire-resistant plants like hardwood trees.
- Unmowed grass and dry vegetation in the safety zone can provide a fire path right to your home. Remove twigs, dead limbs, leaves and needles regularly.
- Tree limbs & shrubs should not be within 15 feet of a stove pipe or chimney outlet. Prune shrubs next to your home, removing overgrowth, dead leaves and branches.
- Stack firewood at least 100 feet away and uphill from your house.

Get Involved & Learn More:

Thinning for fire risk reduction is often controversial in the environmental community because fire is often used as an excuse to log forests at the expense of ecological integrity while actually increasing the risk of fire for the Wildlands/Urban interface. The question to ask of the proposed logging in the Wildlands/Urban interface of the Polallie-Cooper Project is whether the forests in the Clan & Kilt timber sales are truly in the Wildlands/Urban interface, how "fire-safe" these forests currently are, and whether the proposed actions would increase or reduce the "fire-safety" of these areas. Is the restoration and fire management proposed here legitimate or is it a political excuse to log trees of commercial value and prepare the area for ski expansion development?

Bark is currently in the process of visiting the areas proposed for logging in the Wildlands/Urban interface. We need your help ground-truthing these areas. In the Wildlands/Urban interface, we need to know where the big trees are, how big they are, what species they are, and if they are labeled to cut or to save. Large Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir Trees are fire resistant. These trees are most likely to withstand a catastrophic fire. Removing older trees instead of small trees of less commercial value undercuts any efforts at fire risk reduction through thinning. We also are looking for the density of the forest and for fuel ladders (do the smaller trees lean up against medium trees, lean up near the crowns of the oldest trees increasing the risk for crown-fires?) What is the fuel load on the forest floor? How close are the areas designated for cutting to protect the Urban/Wildlands interface actually to the interface? Are they within 200 feet of a home?

Our preliminary examinations have found:

- Fairly open stands of diverse moist forest recovering from partial stand replacement fires in the late 1800s, with some older doug firs marked to be cut (despite their fire resistant qualities).
- Mature diverse forests dominated by grand-firs naturally recovered from a more intense stand replacement fire. These stands appeared dense from a distance but appeared well spaced when entered. Areas of old ponderosa pines marked to cut have been found.
- Groves of fairly dense mature lodgepole pine. Lodgepole pine is part of the natural ecological succession following stand replacement fires. These areas have not yet recovered to the stage of the other two types of forest we witnessed. We were particularly troubled by the tree species other than lodgepole pine marked to be cut directly adjacent to the areas dominated by lodgepole pine.

Information From: Thinning, Fire and Forest Restoration: A Science-Based Approach for National Forests in the Interior Northwes by Richard Brown; Wildfire: a Natural Part of Life in the American West by Native Forest Network ; www.fire-ecology.org