

Damage goes deep in forests

Storm winds in coastal counties knocked down thousands of acres of timber

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The double-barreled storm that hit Oregon more than a week ago laid waste thousands of acres of forests, primarily in the coastal stretches of Clatsop County where wind speeds exceeded 100 miles per hour.

Some trees went down the traditional way, uprooted in a tangle of debris and mud. But many more snapped like twigs as gusty winds blasted the central and northern coastline.

"It just leveled those trees," said Tom Savage, Astoria District forester. "When the wind blows that hard everything in its path goes down."

Federal, state and corporate foresters are still assessing the damage. Early estimates show significant blowdown -- 10,000 acres of fallen trees on state and private lands in Clatsop County and at least 500 acres in the Tillamook State Forest. The Siuslaw National Forest reported widespread damage in the Hebo District, but had not yet compiled acreage estimates.

Overall, the damage measured in acres or millions of board feet may not set records. But, the unique character of the blowdown, with swaths of splintered and fractured trunks, will likely memorialize the event.

"You just went 'wow,' " said Savage, who began surveying the damage around his Astoria offices that Monday and Tuesday. "It took out trees as small as 15 to 20 years old; trees that are normally really flexible just snapped right off."

Recent logging in the area may have added to the devastation by exposing previously sheltered stands of trees to the wind blasts.

"Likely harvesting played a role in the wind-throw," said Wolf Read, a consulting meteorologist for Oregon Climate Service, who reviewed photos of blowdown areas in western Clatsop County.

Clatsop County lies in the northwest corner of the state, taking in the towns of Cannon Beach, Seaside and Astoria. The worst damage occurred close to the Pacific coastline, widening as the storm moved north.

Because the 145,000-acre Clatsop State Forest stretches along the county's eastern border, it escaped some of the most intense winds and some of the worst blowdown

Weyerhaeuser hit hard

Instead, private timber owner Weyerhaeuser Co. "bore the brunt of it," Savage said.

Weyerhaeuser is the county's largest private landowner. Others with timber holdings in the area include Longview Fibre and Hampton Affiliates. Foresters estimate 7,000 acres of blowdown on private forest lands, compared with 3,000 acres in the Clatsop State Forest.

Weyerhaeuser owns 1.1 million acres of forests in Oregon and another 1.1 million acres in Washington. Much of the company's timberland lies in northwestern Oregon and southwestern Washington.

"We've seen a fair amount of damage" in both states, said Weyerhaeuser spokesman Frank Mendizabal.

The volume of downed trees -- consisting primarily of Douglas fir -- has yet to be tallied, Mendizabal said.

Split or snapped-off trees often aren't as valuable at the mill, bad news for timber companies already facing a housing slump and depressed prices. Still, Weyerhaeuser will salvage what it can, Mendizabal said, and, overall, doesn't expect storm-related losses to materially affect the company's bottom line.

State and federal forests fill most of Tillamook County. Initial assessments placed blowdown in the Tillamook State Forest at about 500 acres, or 10 million board feet.

Foresters in the Hebo District of the Siuslaw National Forest flew over the storm area on Wednesday, the first time weather allowed them to survey the damage from the sky.

"We saw a lot of trees down, scattered all over the entire district," said Joni Quarnstrom, spokeswoman for the Siuslaw National Forest.

Access roads blocked

Trees lay across access roads every 200 feet or so, Quarnstrom said, delaying efforts to assess the damage on the ground.

Foresters drew comparisons to last year's holiday season storm. In Clatsop County, those Dec. 15 winds brought down a similar volume of trees but over a larger area.

"This one was much narrower," Savage said, "like a tornado track in the Midwest."

Most of the trees that fell in 1996 came up by their roots, unable to grip the rain-soaked earth. The soils were drier this time around, "so the force of the wind just snapped things," Savage said.

So much downed timber has drawn the attention of passers-by looking for extra firewood. But they should take their chain saws elsewhere. State and federal officials will put together salvage sales, but until then, the blowdown is out of bounds.

Victor Gallegos of Beaverton said he stopped alongside a nice patch of blowdown last weekend to cut a little firewood. But soon after he fired up his chain saw a state policeman pulled alongside and told him he couldn't cut without a permit.

"Bigger logs I can understand, but there's a lot of debris that a Joe Blow like me could use for firewood," Gallegos said. "If you've got a cop there with flashing lights, that can kill the moment."

State and federal officials cited safety reasons for keeping the public out of the storm-ravaged area. But, they said, permits are available in other areas of the forest. Just visit a local office for details, or go to <http://egov.oregon.gov/ODF/>

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