

July 26, 2002

For Immediate Release

Press Contact: Mike Gaudern, Executive Director, Oregon Small Woodlands Association at 503-588-1813.

Now politicians seem to agree hands-off forest management policies of the 1990s were a big mistake could we please move forward!

SALEM , Ore. - Community Based Natural Resource groups are calling on Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle to support legislation giving forest managers nationwide leeway to approve thinning operations to reduce fire risks. Daschle, D-South Dakota, fought to prevent Republicans from including such leeway for the U.S. Forest Service during conference committee negotiations on the Farm Bill last April. However, with the public growing angry over catastrophic fires burning across the West, Daschle apparently had a change of heart on July 23, when he slipped language into a \$29 million defense spending bill exempting his home state from environmental regulations and lawsuits in order to allow logging to reduce fire risks. When House Republicans learned of that maneuver giving favored treatment to his home state while forests are going up in smoke in Oregon, Washington, Arizona, California, Colorado and other western states, they responded July 25 with legislation extending the same exemptions for other states that Daschle sought for South Dakota. To quote Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, "What's good for the Black Hills should be good for every forest in the United States." Nationwide, more than 50,000 fires have burned an estimated 3.7 million acres as of July 25.

In Oregon, where fires have burned more than 220,000 acres already this summer, natural resource groups are urging Congress and the Bush administration to abandon hands-off forest policies of the 1990s. Those policies, promoted by environmental extremists through lawsuits and political pressure, that have left the nation's forests sickly and overgrown, and puts pressure to import timber from other regions of the world, often less protected, in order to satisfy the U.S.A.'s consumption of wood fiber.

Extremist lawsuits and political tactics are coming under fire amid what is shaping up to be one of the worst fire seasons in Oregon history. Oregon Small Woodlands Association and other groups call for more balanced forest management policies on federal and private lands. As public outrage over the fires builds, federal officials are pushing for forest health to be restored as top priority at the Forest Service in lieu of the political pandering to extremists that prevailed during the 1990s. In a report released July 9, the U.S. Forest Service said that nearly half of the forest management operations nationwide designed to reduce fire loads and improve forest health were stalled by extremist environmental lawsuits.

Some of the major Oregon wildfires include Eyerly fire near Madras burned 20,000 acres and 18 homes; 747 Fire near, 9,000 acres near Madras; Monument, 25,000 near Unity in Baker County, Mahogany, 42,000; Malheur Complex, 8,000 acres near John Day; Flagtail, 6,500 acres; Biscuit Complex, 3,500 acres near Coos Bay; Tiller Complex, 3,200 acres near Roseburg; North Umpqua Complex near Medford, 600 acres; and Grizzly, 6,500 near the Oregon/California border; Winter/Tool Box, 92,000 burned in lake County; and Squire Peak, 3,100 near Medford. All were caused by a combination of lightening strikes and heavy fuel loads resulting from restrictions on forest management practices imposed as a result of lawsuits by extremist environmental lawsuits.

As of July 22, a total of 16 fires burning across the Northwest were located in Oregon. Oregon forest officials and Community Resource groups agree it's time for a return to science-based forest management policies. Matt Reidy, fire management officer for Wallow Whitman National Forests said second growth forests like those where all of the fires are burning are going up in flames because they are thicker, sicker and more susceptible to catastrophic fires. In many areas of East of the Cascades, fuel loads of up to 80 tons per acre of down and standing dead trees are common.

"Even though private forests and woodlands typically have much lower fuel loads and are better managed for fire suppression than government lands, private woodlands suffer when fires originating on government lands spread," said Mike Gaudern, executive director of the Oregon Small Woodlands Association (OSWA), a Salem based group that represents over 2000 family woodlands owners.

"The time for single-issue dominating policymaking needs to come to an end. For that to occur, all parties need to realize that we have the best chance of success if we look at economic, environmental and social issues as one," Gaudern said. "That holistic approach is the key to a successful strategy for restoring forest health and reduce fire risks. I am glad to see the Senate and Congress are finally addressing the fire management issue. I plead on behalf of OSWA members and all other Americans that the politicians refrain from scoring political points by arguing over who was right or wrong and begin to deliver a strategy in which they think global and act local. Any Oregonian who supports this point of view is encouraged to join us in our efforts."

"We have to work in the woods to save the woods," said Gaudern. "Forest fires don't recognize boundaries where poorly managed federal forests adjoin well-managed private woodlands. OSWA works with an insurance company to offer its members discounted limited liability insurance. This insurance provides coverage when fires originate on a member's property, but does not protect them from catastrophic loss when fires originate on federal lands. For this and other reasons, OSWA also lobbies for policy makers to think about the impacts on all stakeholders when developing plans for one type of land base whether it is at federal, state or private level. We promote sensible policies allowing small woodlands owners to live on and actively manage their land for a variety of objectives and to allow selective harvest of federal and state land to encourage forest health. This strategy would in turn provide a balanced set of benefits to all Oregonians."

It should therefore be of little surprise when Gaudern says "OSWA supports Hal Salwasser's commentary in the press this week regarding the need for sensible forest management. As he points out, the U.S. is now importing one-third of its wood fiber. Often this supply comes from such areas as Brazil, Russia, and Indonesia that is suffering up to an 80% level of illegal harvesting. Please explain to me the environmental benefits of continuing to leave overcrowded stands in Oregon while importing illegal timber from some of the world's most precious bio-diverse eco regions. " " We need to get an infrastructure back in place that allows a variety of forest products to enter local and export markets so people can support Oregon's small woodland owners by buying our well managed wood." Christoph Buchler, an Oregon Small Woodlands owner in the Medford area, nervously watched over the weekend as the Sterling Creek fire advanced within a mile of his property and the Griffin Creek fire was just over the hill.

As the fires approached, he said this year's devastation should serve as a wakeup call to federal, state and private forest owners and managers. While most of the high priority firefighting efforts are focused on saving structures, Christoph said nobody seems to be talking about the loss of resources, including wildlife habitat and timber stands foresters and woodland owners are required to leave as buffer strips to minimize erosion, improve water quality and other benefits to endangered salmon and steelhead.

"Will towns have to burn first to get us to recognize that we have neglected the forests?", Christoph said. Like most small woodland owners, Christoph's forests are thinned to a healthy level and brush and pests are controlled to the point that a controlled type of burn would run along the ground and clear out brush and weeds without damaging his timber stands. However, he said the kind of fires that come roaring across the federal forests are uncontrolled monsters with flames so high and hot that they devour virtually everything in their path. Instead of burning along the ground like a controlled burn, raging forest fires burn trees clear to the top, destroying habitat for northern spotted owls and other endangered species. He said forest management practices have to change to address actual conditions of second growth forests. Only by encouraging the types of management practices needed to restore healthy timber stands will wildlife habitat, water quality, health timber and other benefits of the forests be preserved for future generations. "The hands-off mentality has got to change," Christoph said. In Oregon, the state Forestry Department has the authority to bill landowners if actions or mismanagement on their property contributes to the spread of forest fires. Christoph suggested taking that law a step further to give the department power to bill environmental extremist groups for negligence where their lawsuits prevented remedial actions needed to prevent catastrophic forest fires. Over the past few months, Forest Service officials have been calling on Congress for expedited authority to bypass the appeals process so they can get on with the thinning, brush and weed control activities necessary to restore forest health. With Oregon's firefighting force drawn out of state to help battle raging forest fires in Colorado, Utah and Arizona, firefighters from as far away as Minnesota, Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina and Florida were flown in to help battle a swath of wildfires that burned more than 220,000 acres and burned several homes.

Earlier this month Gov. John Kitzhaber declared a fire emergency and called in 500 Oregon National Guard troops, bringing the total number of firefighters battling blazes across the state at more than 8,000. Costs for fighting fires on forests and rangelands across central, southern and Eastern Oregon by Mid-July had already topped \$7 million, which is causing some concern that the state may be on course to break the 1987 record of \$30 million. This year the actual impact on Oregon's, depleted state coffers will be offset by fire insurance that kicks in when firefighting costs hit \$10 million and covers up to \$42.5 million. The annual premium is \$3.4 million so it turned out to be a good investment this year. Timber companies and other private landowners pay for firefighting costs on private lands in Oregon through assessments. Nationally, this year's firefighting costs are on a course to top \$1 billion.

Please use your browser [Back button](#) to return to the OSWA home page.