

The National Fire Plan

Highway 20 Project and Cache Mountain Fire

Oregon

2002



Hazardous fuels reduction projects, funded by the National Fire Plan, are the primary means of reducing the size and intensity of wildfire. The Cache Mountain Fire showed that active forest management is both successful and necessary.

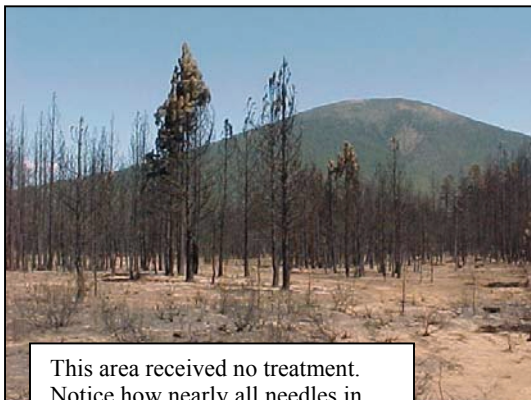
The Cache Mountain fire began with a lightning strike Tuesday, July 23, 2002. Ultimately, it grew to 4,200 acres, burned two homes, threatened 84 more and caused the evacuation of 1,300 residences in the Black Butte Ranch Resort community. The fire occurred on the Deschutes National Forest, Weyerhaeuser-owned land, and private land within the resort community.

Wildfire near an urban interface is a major concern for land managers. Recognizing this, the Deschutes National Forest, with the support of Central Oregon Fire Management Services, has been actively involved with hazardous fuels reduction for many years. Combined with support from the National Fire Plan and cooperating agencies and communities, hazardous fuels reduction projects made a positive impact on what could have been a very different scenario.



This area typifies much of the land in Central Oregon – tightly packed trees interspersed with bug kill.

Fuel treatments in the Cache Mountain area were part of the “Highway 20 Project.” In addition, the forest had partnered with Black Butte Ranch in 1995 to thin, hand-pile, mow, and burn small trees in the stands of ponderosa pine within and adjacent to the ranch. Firefighters used an area of the forest that had been treated as the starting point for a burnout operation that slowed a flank of the fire. The only place where the crown fire entered the ranch development was at the diagonal of a section corner in dense privately owned unthinned stands. Even here, work done in the ranch and excellent coordination between the agencies fighting the fire saved 84 threatened homes.



This area received no treatment. Notice how nearly all needles in the trees have burned away.

While it is important to note that hazardous fuels reduction does not guarantee safety of communities, the Cache Mountain Fire, as well as others, has shown that treatments help trees and homes survive, and aid firefighting efforts.

Thinning combined with periodic mowing or an understory prescribed burn diminishes a wildfire's ability to climb trees to start a crown fire. It also reduces the intensity of fire burning in ground-level vegetation and other dry fuels. That's good for the forest because fire suppression is generally ineffective in crown fires, which kill a large number of trees. The goal is to get the fire to the ground where fire fighters, dozers, water and retardant drops, and other efforts can have an effect. Hazardous fuels reduction is a continuous process with different techniques being applied over several years to establish a healthy ecosystem that is resilient to drought, insects and disease, and wildfire.

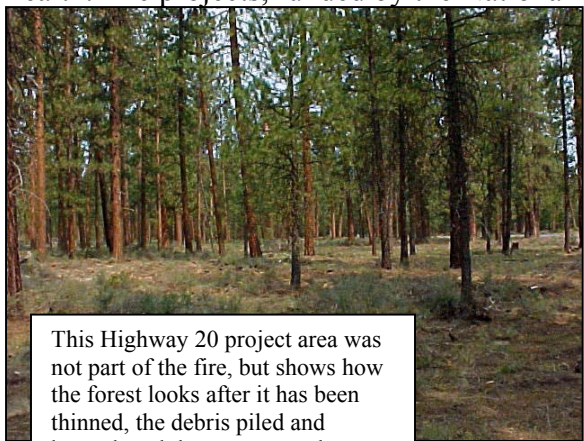


This area had been thinned and under-burned. Needles are still green. These trees will survive.

The other element that played a key role in the success of the Cache Mountain Fire was excellent interagency and community coordination, which included a well-thought out evacuation plan.

The fire was contained on August 1. An evaluation of the burned area to determine rehabilitation objectives began immediately thereafter.

Hazardous fuels reduction projects benefit private landowners as well as ecosystem health. The projects, funded by the National Fire Plan, help communities work towards a common goal of sustainable ecosystems, decreased fire suppression costs and prevention of unacceptable loss of valuable property and resources.



This Highway 20 project area was not part of the fire, but shows how the forest looks after it has been thinned, the debris piled and burned, and the area mowed.

While Central Oregon Fire Management Services has been involved in hazardous fuels reduction for many years, the National Fire Plan has and will help to ensure that these needed projects are funded and can continue far into the future.