Guiding Principles for Forest Management in Eastern Oregon--Eastern Oregon County Association (December 2019)

Eastern Oregon County Association (EOCA) principles are focused on providing healthy, fire-resistant forests that meet the needs of citizens and visitors to our counties. As elected officials, the health, safety, and economic viability of our citizens has to be our highest priority. The 2018 fire in Paradise, CA and the summer of smoke in 2018 made it clear to everyone that forest management must change. The Canyon Creek fire in 2016 (just south of John Day) was a local example of the risky situation currently faced by both residents of eastern Oregon and the firefighters called upon to battle wildfires. The accumulation of fuel in our public forests has created a hazard to residents and visitors to our counties.

The forests affected by fuels accumulation are so extensive that the USDA-Forest Service will need to work with EOCA and private businesses to achieve any reasonable level of success. Shared stewardship will be necessary to allow significant progress. There are not enough federal conservation dollars to solve the problem. As elected officials in our respective counties, we must be involved in the decisions that affect the physical and economic health of our citizens and our communities.

Economics

The EOCA guiding principle is that forests should be used to the economic benefit of our citizens. National forests have a significant role to play in the economic health of many Eastern Oregon communities. Economic viability is critical to expanding and maintaining local infrastructure and services, such as roads, hospitals, law enforcement, schools, and emergency services. The intent of Congress in creating National Forests was to provide a consistent supply of timber, and not to be reserved for non-economic uses. Legislative efforts over the years have reinforced the multiple use concept. The current need for large-scale landscape restoration (Hessburg and others, 2015) will require economic uses of the forest to help pay for restoration efforts. Creativity will be needed to attract new industries and find new uses for forest materials.
Access

EOCA considers maintenance of open forests a guiding principle. Access to national forest lands is a right of every American citizen. Our constituents, many of whom are third and fourth generation Eastern Oregonians have deep cultural ties to the federal forestlands, and desire access. Fire suppression and ecological restoration are two overarching reasons access is vital for successful forest management. Access is also required for a variety of uses including but not limited to -- sustainable logging, firewood harvest, grazing, general recreation, hunting, fishing, hiking, use of ATV’s, and so on. There must be no net loss of access roads and the forest road system must be left open. Access feeds back to economic output and restoration in many important ways.

Special Designations

The EOCA principle is no more special designations other than general forest. It seems clear to us that there are already too many special designations. A reasonable goal would be to review existing designations to determine if they are consistent with management for healthy forests. Until such a review can be conducted, it makes no sense to add more special designations. Use of existing resources for dealing with special designation requirements takes away from the bigger goal of managing for healthy, fire-resistant forests.

Pace and Scale

The EOCA principle is that harvest levels on the Blue Mountain forest at a minimum need to be at the Long Term Sustained yield level. This level will support a continuous supply of timber for the American public and support our local communities. Due to the current condition of the Blue Mountains, EOCA supports a departure from the long-term sustained yield as permitted by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) to accelerate the forest into a fire-resistant condition. The huge departure from historical conditions (Hessburg and Agee 2003) and the need for landscape-level restoration to maintain connectivity (Hessburg and others 2015) requires that an aggressive pace and scale of effort be emphasized in forest planning. The scale of the problem should
encourage shared stewardship with an emphasis on effective communication among federal, state, and private land managers.

Grazing

The EOCA principle is continued or increased grazing use in the forest. No net loss of grazing is acceptable. Grazing can have many benefits, but maybe the most important is the value of grazing for fine fuel reduction. Johnson and others (2017) found that fine fuels may be key in predicting forest fire occurrence. As forest overstory is removed in restoration efforts, understory forage production should increase back to more historical levels (from currently depressed levels). In order to accelerate progress toward a fire-resistant forest, EOCA requests the reauthorization of vacant and closed allotments to permit holders, not to grass banks. We also suggest a broader view of grazing standards, rather than a focus on only very specific aspects of riparian zone plant communities.

Fire and Salvage

The EOCA principle is that all wildfires should be aggressively fought, and immediately after the fire there should be plans to salvage as much of the remaining timber as possible. Although wildfire certainly does remove fuel, it is very common for large diameter fuels to remain on site. Within a few years, the risk of new wildfires is back to pre-fire levels. Categorical exclusions must be used fully in order to remove trees that have marketability as soon as possible post-fire.

Coordination

The EOCA principle is that federal agencies that manage land in our counties shall work with county governments during planning, implementation, and monitoring of all projects. NFMA requires interaction with local governments. In addition, county government can help provide the agencies with local knowledge that will facilitate better decisions. County governments can also assist in letting the public know the reasons decisions are made, but that is only the case if they are involved in the decision-making process and understand the logic.
Wildlife and Fisheries

The EOCA principle is that working toward healthy, fire-resistant forests results in abundant fish and wildlife populations. The large proportion of high-density forests creates a risk of catastrophic wildfire, but also reduces the area of habitat types that were once very common in the Blue Mountains. The current condition of our forests suggests that we will perpetually have some areas of high-density tree cover. High water use by dense forests, particularly in the higher-elevation portions of the watershed may reduce late season stream flows (Moore and Wondzell 2005), stressing fish populations. Catastrophic wildfire can also create short-term stresses for fish (Burton 2005).

Citations


