

United States
Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Oregon State Office



A Burning Question



Only You ...

Through the years, Smokey the Bear has done an excellent job of selling the message about wildfire prevention. Who hasn't heard him boom, "only you can prevent forest fires," dozens of times? We all know what fires do — turn lush green forests into charcoal, transform fast-flowing, clear streams into clogged channels of silt and ash, and destroy the homes of thousands of woodland creatures. Fire is bad. Fire is the enemy. There's nothing good about fire.

Sorry, Smokey. Fire can be good for the forests and rangelands.

The truth is that fire is a natural part of the forest and range ecosystems. It can be a powerful, destructive force (the kind that our friend Smokey wants us to prevent) or it can be harnessed and used as an important tool in establishing new forests and rangelands and even reducing the danger posed by wildfires.

Who Needs It?

In Oregon and Washington, public and private forest managers have the greatest need for the use of "prescribed" fire. Fire as a tool of managing forests is used under planned and controlled conditions.



Young seedling

When timber is harvested, the wood debris left behind can make it tough to plant new seedlings. Fire can clear the smaller debris and prepare the area for planting. Burning also reduces competition between seedlings and other plants for air, sunlight, and water.

In some places, fire is used to prevent fire. Forests clogged with dead timber pose a real hazard.

Once a wildfire starts in dry wood, it can spread very rapidly. If that happens, everyone has a big problem. But if the same slash is burned under planned and controlled circumstances, with crews and equipment on the site, then the hazard is reduced.

Since the 1960s, prescribed fire has been used on the rangelands of the Pacific Northwest. It can effectively convert plant communities from one predominant species to another. That, in turn, may improve wildlife habitat and increase forage for livestock. Like prescribed burning in forests, controlled fires in the range country are done only under the most favorable conditions.

The Air That you Breathe ...

As the adage implies, where there's fire, there's smoke. And all that smoke is something most people would prefer not breathing, right?

Right. That's why prescribed burning is so carefully regulated. In Oregon, it's controlled by the Oregon Department of Forestry. Accurate weather updates are provided regularly and OSDF allows

burning on days when smoke will be carried away from populated areas. Wind speed and direction, temperature, relative humidity, fuel moistures and other requirements must all be met before ignition. Sure, sometimes the weather will unexpectedly change and smoke may drift into the larger cities and towns, but that doesn't often happen. More than 90 percent of all prescribed burning in the state is completed without smoke management problems.

The smoke is mostly carbon dioxide and water, neither of which is considered toxic. Some contaminants that may affect health have been found in smoke, but in quantities so small that they would unlikely hurt people.



How Prescribed Fires Get Started



Helitorch

The two most common methods of lighting fires are by hand, with a "drip torch," or from helicopter-mounted equipment called a "helitorch." Technology is constantly improving, promising even greater safety and efficiency.

In the future, for example, lasers may be used to start prescribed fires.

Back to Smokey

The Bear is right about fires

in uncontrolled situations. One careless moment can mean devastation for entire forests and

tens of thousands of acres of rangelands.

But fire does have its place in forestry and range management. For thousands of

years, fires were an important part of the natural ecosystems, clearing the land of debris and helping some species to propagate. We've again realized its value and learned to harness its tremendous power and put it to work for us - and you.

Drip torch

