



A Fire Tolerant Forest

By Jack Southworth, Rancher and facilitator of the Harney County Restoration Collaborative, in light of the multiple megafires and wildfires that have caused devastation in Western Oregon.

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The south end of the Malheur National Forest, which lies in the north end of Harney County and is encompassed by the Emigrant Creek Ranger District, is a dry, conifer forest. Historically, frequent fires burned across its landscape every 15 to 25 years. Since European settlement, approximately 150 years ago, fires were seen as a bad thing and were routinely put out as soon as possible. As a result of a lack of fire across the landscape, what was once an open, almost savannah-like forest is now thick with small diameter trees, the trees that were formerly consumed by occasional, low-intensity naturally caused fires. As a result, nowadays, when fires do escape early containment they tend to become very large in size and very intense in their burning, often consuming entire stands of trees.

Recognizing the unsustainability of the current situation—not only ecologically, but socially and economically as well—the Harney County Restoration Collaborative (HCRC) has been working for the last ten years with the Emigrant Creek Ranger District (ECRD) to create forest treatment prescriptions that help bring back a 'fire tolerant' forest. A forest that not only can handle a cool-season prescribed burn, but hotter wildfires during the fire season as well. As a result of our close collaboration with the ECRD and their silviculturalists, the HCRC is helping create treated areas that:

1. Have wider spacing between trees in order to reduce fuel loads;
2. Protect old-growth trees as anchors of the forest ecosystem;
3. Have variations in spacing so that the forest is a mix of clumps, gaps, openings and thickets;
4. Removes the small diameter, non-commercial trees from the forest so that treated areas can have cooler prescribed burns to reduce future fuel loads; and
5. Reintroduces prescribed fire as an important tool to maintain a fire tolerant forest.

If current trends continue, we need to create a forest that can handle warmer and drier summers where fires will probably be a normal event. It is the goal of the HCRC to have such a fire tolerant forest that fires can be managed rather than simply extinguished thereby letting Mother Nature bring back the open, savannah-like forests that were here when settlers first arrived.

High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convenes and supports six collaboratives including the Harney County Restoration Collaborative.

