Reflections on Eastern Oregon's 2024 Wildfire Season

Challenges, Lessons and the Road to Recovery

March 2025

By James Williams

The 2024 wildfire season in Eastern Oregon was one of the most intense in recent history, with over 200,000 acres burned across multiple fires. Beginning with the Upper Pine prescribed burn that turned into a wildfire on July 8, the season escalated rapidly with the Falls Fire on July 10 and the Telephone Fire on July 19. Extreme fuel conditions, coupled with hot, dry weather, made suppression efforts challenging.

Now, months later, land managers, fire professionals and community members are reflecting on the season and asking, what worked, what didn't, and how do we improve for the future?

Why Did So Many Acres Burn?

According to Shane Theall, Burns Interagency Fire Management Officer, the season's extreme fire behavior was driven by critically dry fuel conditions, some measured at the 96th percentile. And a parched, sun-baked landscape can lead to disaster. For instance, in one large run, fire burned 30,000 to 50,000 acres, Theall noted during a September 30 meeting involving both the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative and the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative. Drought conditions and the abundance of flammable invasive grasses, such as medusahead, contributed to the rapid spread. And in Eastern Oregon, there's an abundance of such grasses.

In a recent interview, Dave Hannibal, Base Manager at Grayback Forestry, put it simply: "It's really all about available fuel. That's what's driving fires." He emphasized that invasive grass control proved a significant factor in slowing the fires' progress.

Where Did Fire Treatments Work?

Despite the challenges, many of the pre-existing fuel treatments helped reduce fire intensity and provided critical control points for firefighters. At Lone Pine Road, for example, juniper cutting and invasive grass management effectively slowed the fire's advance. In contrast, areas lacking management—such as Myrtle Creek Canyon—burned with far greater severity.

In forested areas, thinning, prescribed burns, and commercial harvesting also played a role in reducing fire intensity. In fact, the fuel breaks near where the Telephone Fire burned are proof positive.

“The green canopy is still there in much of the pretreated areas, Hannibal said. “The reduced mortality in the overstory trees shows the treatments were successful. A lot of it will not count as ‘high severity burn.’” Such promising results point to the importance of proactive landscape treatments when working to mitigate wildfire damage.

The effectiveness of treatments varied. Logging and mechanical thinning showed positive outcomes in many areas, like around the 31 road and 500 Flat where, according to Hannibal, the burned zones looked remarkably intact. But in ecologically sensitive areas like the Myrtle Creek Drainage, fire burned unchecked due to legal and environmental constraints around this area and those like it. The consequences proved devastating. At least one area expert warned against “loving something to death,” or the idea that well-intentioned restrictions, designed to protect a fragile area could, inadvertently, contribute to severe fire sometime in the future.

Challenges in Fire Suppression and Management

While fuel treatments did prove valuable, firefighting efforts faced numerous challenges. The severity of the season required four separate Incident Management Teams, and included crews from Alaska and Idaho. In that same Sept. meeting, Josh Giles, Malheur National Forest Emigrant Creek District Ranger reported that staffing shortages plagued response efforts, with crews sometimes operating at only 50- or 60-percent of needed capacity. Recent federal budget cuts could exacerbate this issue.

Middle management shortages also hindered operations, Giles said. He and others emphasized the need for more experienced supervisors on the ground, particularly to oversee engines and hand crews. Some personnel and equipment were underutilized due to administrative bottlenecks and a lack of coordination between local responders and incoming, out-of-state teams.

The Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, designed for initial attack on minor blazes, found themselves stretched thin, a predicament that would play out over weeks of extended firefighting efforts. Emergency funds quickly dwindled, as did supplies. “We ran out of money for fuel and equipment repairs,” reported Dave French of the Crane RFPA.

Despite these challenges, the RFPAs played a crucial role in the firefighting efforts. Their intimate knowledge of the local terrain proved invaluable, especially when working alongside understaffed or out-of-area firefighters unfamiliar with the region.

Another area of concern was the cautious approach to prescribed fire. Area experts suggest Eastern Oregon needs to scale up its prescribed fire program significantly—perhaps up to 40,000 acres annually—to effectively reduce future fire risks.

Recovery and Restoration Efforts

As the fire season came to a close, focus shifted to restoration. Giles said that emergency stabilization efforts, such as road repair, hazardous tree removal, and reseeding, began almost immediately. “We put together a contract for reforestation, Giles said. “So we will probably plant around 3,000 acres of trees in the footprint of the Falls Fire.”

Mounting restoration efforts for 200,000 acres of scorched landscape is no small feat. Giles pointed out that within the Falls Fire footprint alone that translates to about 850 miles of road and 225 miles of fencing that needs attention. And of course there are multiple affected campgrounds—recovery is a big task. “Most of our normal program work has been set aside and [restoration is] our number one priority,” Giles said.

Giles reported that his team had secured the restoration funding they needed for the immediate term. But federal budget cuts have impacted the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other agencies, raising concerns about future

restoration efforts. Available resources like Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ESR) and Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) are being utilized, but long-term sustainability is uncertain.

How to manage? “Do the best we can with what we got,” Giles added. “Our efforts for this year will be focused on restoration and rehab for the Falls and Telephone Fires.”

Looking Ahead: What Needs to Change?

The 2024 wildfire season underscored the need for continued collaboration and more proactive, landscape-scale approaches to fire management. Area experts seemed to agree that the best path forward is to keep working together but do much more of the preventative work that’s already being done. That means more prescribed fires, more clearing of invasive grasses (and replacing them with native species) and more juniper thinning. Of course this also means more money. Securing funding to support these initiatives will be a priority.

As Eastern Oregon looks ahead, one concept is clear: the landscape must be managed proactively to prevent further devastation. Perhaps, amid the destruction, there’s a silver lining. While the 2024 fires tested firefighting resources and strained recovery efforts, they also provided a blueprint for improving resilience in the years to come.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.

HIGH DESERT Partnership