Big Windy Fire Report

Wildfire on the Wild Rogue
An analysis of fire effects, fire suppression impacts and management implications

Executive Summary • March 26, 2014

Klamath Forest Alliance
www.klamathforestalliance.org
“The Big Windy Fire was by all accounts a wildfire that burned within the range of variability in terms of fire mosaic and fire severity. The fire itself had many positive environmental effects; however, in the process of suppressing the Big Windy Fire many negative and lasting environmental impacts were sustained to the region’s forests, wildlands and watersheds.”

On July 26, 2013 lightning crashed down on northern Josephine and southern Douglas Counties in Southern Oregon, starting numerous wildfires in the Rogue River watershed, wild and scenic river corridor, and the Zane Grey Roadless Area. The Big Windy Fire Report explores these wildfires, their mosaic, burn severity and ecological implications, as well as the impact of fire suppression to this wilderness landscape. The report identifies direct and indirect fire suppression impacts from fireline construction and backburning operations to wilderness and roadless area values, as well as impacts to important recreational resources, world-class fisheries, and old-growth habitat. Direct impacts associated with fire suppression actions include the creation of extensive fireline created by bulldozing otherwise pristine landscapes proposed for wilderness designation, the falling of literally thousands of old-growth trees and snags, widespread soil disturbance, the introduction of noxious weeds to otherwise uninfected localities, and an increase in sedimentation and turbidity in world-renowned and vitally important salmonid habitat.

The Rogue River is not simply an ecological and biological treasure trove; it is also an important economic contributor to the surrounding regions of Josephine, Curry, Jackson and Douglas Counties. Tourists, anglers, whitewater rafters, and wilderness enthusiasts travel from around the world to experience the wild and pristine nature of the Rogue River corridor. In fact, a 2008 report conducted by ECONorthwest identifies recreational opportunities in the Wild and Scenic Rogue River as contributing $1.5 billion annually to the local and regional economy through non-use values. In a region of depressed economies and high unemployment the economic
contributions of the Rogue River are significant, including 445 full and part-time jobs and $15.4 million in personal income. The contributions also include $1.4 million annually from commercial fishing and $16 million for sport fishing in the area. The total economic output of business interests directly related to the quality of water, fisheries and habitat in the area amounts to $30 million annually. Many of these businesses and economic values are directly impacted by land management decisions, including fire suppression.

The permanent protection of the Wild Rogue Wilderness is not only practical, but also politically popular. A recent 2012 poll conducted by the American Rivers conservation group found that 77% of southwest Oregon residents in Jackson, Josephine, Curry and Douglas Counties support protection of the proposed Wild Rogue Wilderness additions and further protections for Wild and Scenic tributary streams. To safeguard not only the important ecological values that continue to bring tourists and outdoor recreationalists to the area, but also to ensure continued economic stability, the biological legacy of the Wild and Scenic Rogue River must be protected. These protections should include:

• Wilderness Designation of the 58,000-acre Wild Rogue Wilderness Additions and Zane Grey Roadless Area.
• The designation of 93 miles of new Wild and Scenic River additions for Rogue River tributaries downstream of Galice, Oregon.
• The creation of a Fire Management Plan for the Wild Rogue Wilderness
• Agency transparency regarding fire suppression activities and discretionary fire suppression tactics.

Natural Fuel Reduction

Over 90% of the Big Windy Fire burned at low to very low severity and constituted an understory burn. This was especially true in the region’s late seral forests and within the roadless forests of the Zane Grey Roadless Area. Wildland fire use in the Wild Rogue region should be considered in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Big Windy Fire</th>
<th>Acres burned</th>
<th>Acres burned at high severity</th>
<th>Acres burned at moderate severity</th>
<th>Acres burned at low severity</th>
<th>Acres burned at very low severity or unburned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acres burned</td>
<td>28,328</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>2,721</td>
<td>2,747</td>
<td>22,559</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics

The use of Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST) should be mandated for the Wild Rogue Wilderness, Zane Grey Roadless Area and Wild and Scenic River corridor from Galice to Illahee, Oregon. The use of MIST strategies is required in wilderness areas found within National Park Service lands and should be required on both Forest Service and BLM lands containing wilderness characteristics such as roadless areas, ACECs, RNAs, primitive areas, and designated wilderness areas. According to park service guidelines, “The concept of MIST is to use the minimum amount of forces necessary to effectively achieve the fire management protection objectives consistent with land and resource management objectives. It implies a greater sensitivity to the impacts of suppression tactics and their long-term effects when determining how to implement an appropriate suppression response…MIST is not intended to represent a separate or distinct classification of firefighting tactics but rather a mindset of how to suppress a wildfire while minimizing the long-term effects of a suppression action” (Golden Gate National Recreation Fire Management Plan 2008).

For more information contact the Klamath Forest Alliance
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To download copies of the Big Windy Fire Report visit the following websites:

www.thesiskiyoucrest.blogspot.com
www.theklamathforestalliance.org

Restorative Fire Management

Restorative Fire Management (RFM) utilizes MIST tactics, wildland fire use and a realization that wildfire can be utilized for resource benefit if managed correctly. Restorative Fire Management seeks to restore the process of fire to as many acres as is responsible, necessary and beneficial in each fire event. Backburning and fire use during suppression activities should be conducted responsibly and with natural fire-generated patterns and mosaics in mind. The concept of “loose herding” is especially useful to fire managers looking to utilize MIST and prescribed natural fire for resource benefit. A “confinement” strategy could also be useful in smaller roadless areas or in those that border private residential lands. Fire management should incorporate principals and objectives of forest restoration, fire restoration and in many cases fuel reduction. Prescribed fire and prescribed natural fire should be encouraged and fire safety needs balanced with the need for characteristic fire effects on the landscape.

Wild landscapes need wildfire

Protect the Wild Rogue