



Commissioners to Forest Service: reduce forest fuels loads

ALBANY — Linn County Commissioners Roger Nyquist, Sherrie Sprenger and Will Tucker told representatives of the Willamette National Forest Tuesday morning they have major concerns that unless the U.S. Forest Service makes major policy changes when it comes to timber harvesting, forest floor fuel loads and firefighting priorities, western Oregon will likely experience more massive fires in coming years.

Willamette National Forest Supervisors Dave Warnack and Deputy Supervisor Duane Bishop provided the commissioners with information about plans for fire recovery, fire preparedness and opening public access.

Warnack said the Willamette National Forest will receive \$78 million to be used for fire recovery programs on 200,000 acres that burned in 2020 and 2021. He said that federal funds often must be spent within a one- to three-year time period, but this money does not come with those strings attached.

He said key goals are public safety/access; infrastructure repair; reforestation; restoration; natural resource surveys; and cultural resource surveys.

“We want to work closely with our partners to understand your needs,” Warnack said. “We are asking for your help and participation. We have an open mind about what that would look like.”

Board Chair Nyquist said he has not been happy with the Forest Service for a long time. He said that in the 1970s, there were 64 mills in Linn County and now there are very few.

“Housing was affordable and now it’s not,” Nyquist said. “People weren’t fearing forest fires and now they have real concerns.”

He believes increasing wildfire issues can be traced to the late 1980s when timber sales were reduced significantly due to the Northern Spotted Owl being listing as a threatened or endangered species. He said forests grow about 2.7% per year and if timber sales do not meet or exceed that, the amount of standing fuels and on the ground increases significantly and creates a huge fire threat that worsens every succeeding year.

Nyquist said while the federal funding is welcome, “We don’t need grants, we need chainsaws.”

Warnack said the new U.S. Forest Service chief came from California and is well versed in the escalation of massive wildfires.

“He understands the impact of wildfires on both resources and communities,” Warnack said. “He believes in staying out front of wildfires by reducing fuels through thinning.”



Willamette National Forest Supervisor David Warnack addresses the Linn County Board of Commissioners Tuesday morning.

Warnack said the plan is to identify places where major fires could be stopped before they ever occur by hardening processes — timber reduction etc. That process is already occurring on the Sweet Home Ranger District under the direction of Ranger Nikki Swanson.

Commissioner Sprenger said that in 2008 and 2009, when she was a State Representative, she viewed several timber stewardship projects and while they looked “very pretty, like a park” they produced very few logs for local mills.

“We need a whole lot more harvesting,” Sprenger said.

Commissioner Tucker was especially concerned about access to overhead aircraft — planes and helicopters.

“We have lost planes, helicopters,” Tucker said. “What have we added?”

Bishop said that planes tend to be more effective on flatland fires and that air assets are distributed on a national level and vary as fire season moves by region.

He also questioned the Forest Services policies concerning fighting fires in wilderness areas. He said firefighters need to be able to use chainsaws and other equipment to contain or put out fires before they become massive like the 400,000 acre fire that engulfed

the Santiam Canyon on Labor Day 2020.

Bishop said the Forest Service has a 98% forest fire containment rating and until recent years, the largest fire in Oregon was less than 50,000 acres.

He said that weather patterns are changing and fire season that used to be four to six weeks long, may now stretch out to four or five months.

“That 2% is the issue,” Commissioner Sprenger said. “I implore your agency to change its policies to be more aggressive in fighting fires and increasing timber harvesting and fuels reduction.”

Commissioner Nyquist encouraged the Forest Service to operate more like the McDonald-Dunn Forest in Benton County.

“It is one of my favorites places on earth,” Nyquist said. “Why can’t we do that? Balance timber production and harvesting, reduce fire risk and provide public access?”

Bishop said the Forest Service is governed by the Northwest Forest Plan which was enacted in 1994 under then President Bill Clinton.

Media contact: Alex Paul, Linn County Communications Officer, 541-967-3825 or email apaul@co.linn.or.us.