

The Dangers of Oversimplifying Forest Management

This week 30 large 100+ year old ponderosa pine trees were felled on the Deschutes National Forest. Many of us who closely track the management of the Forest did not want to see this happen. We lost these trees because the Forest Service, specific conservation organizations, and others did not fully and effectively recognize the complexity of managing our dry fire adapted forest ecosystems.

These thirty trees in the 30" diameter range sat within the Deschutes National Forest's West Bend Planning Area. When the 26,700 acre West Bend project was planned in 2012 and 2013, the vast majority of the area was dense stands of second growth trees in the 60-80 year old range. Thousands of acres of very large, widely spaced old growth ponderosa pine trees were clear cut here in the early 20th century to feed Bend's sawmills. Then came many decades of trying to exclude fire from the forest it had shaped for millennia. The result was a far more dense forest, with more brush and less grasses and wildflowers in the understory, and many shade tolerant-fire intolerant trees crowding out ponderosa pines.

This altered condition is bad for native species that depend on open old growth ponderosa pine stands. It makes the forest less resilient to drought and fire. It suppresses the growth of the trees within the dense stands, delaying their growth into large mature trees. Importantly, this condition dramatically increases the likelihood of the forest delivering catastrophic wildfire to our homes.

This is why the West Bend project includes 21,850 acres of thinning, brush mowing, and prescribed fire treatments. It is an ambitious effort to restore our forest to historic conditions, dominated by large widely spaced ponderosa pine with an herbaceous understory. Thousands of acres of these treatments have already been implemented in West Bend - improving habitat, making our forests more healthy and resilient, and reducing the risk of catastrophic fire in the City of Bend.

But within that ocean of dense middle aged second growth forest scheduled for treatment, the Forest Service didn't notice a small stand of trees that were a bit older and larger. These trees were probably only 30-50 years old in the early 20th century when loggers were focused on very large 300 year old trees. But now that small stand holds some of the oldest trees in West Bend. They are not old growth, but they are 30-50 years closer to becoming old growth than their neighbors. Forest Service tree markers oversimplified by treating this stand like the thousands of acres of middle aged "black bark" that surrounded it. With the Forest Service racing to implement thousands of acres of treatments to improve resiliency against future fires and droughts, an error of oversimplification like this is understandable, though by no means desirable.

The more dangerous oversimplification came from Oregon Wild. They understandably wanted to save these 30 trees but took a complicated story of restoring an entire forest landscape and made it a good guy-bad guy story on a few acres. Instead of understanding that the Forest Service could miss the subtle difference in this small stand as they were laying out thousands of acres of needed treatments, Oregon Wild delivered inflammatory rhetoric about the agency and the people implementing the work. I believe that inflammatory rhetoric like this, in turn, led to vandalism of the thinning contractor's equipment. The vandalism led to the contractor racing to complete the thinning and get their equipment out of the area to avoid more vandalism. The Forest Service initially had months to negotiate a contract

modification to unmark the 30 trees but lost those months when good guy-bad guy rhetoric led to vandalism.

Stewarding and restoring our forests is an ecologically and socially complex endeavor. Without a recognition of that complexity – along with humility and respect for others – dangerous mistakes will be made and our forests and our community will suffer.

Phil Chang is a Deschutes County Commissioner, former manager of the State of Oregon's Federal Forest Restoration Program, and a member of Steering Committee of the Deschutes Collaborative Forest Project

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Chang". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent flourish at the end of the word "Chang".

Phil Chang