

## Fire FAQs 2009

### Scope of fire protection

**Q: Which lands does the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) protect from wildfire?**

A: ODF provides fire protection to 15.8 million acres of private and public forestlands. The acreage protected includes all private forestlands in Oregon as well as state- and local government-owned forests, along with 2.8 million acres of federal Bureau of Land Management lands in western Oregon. There are about 30.4 million total acres of forest in Oregon.

**Q: What is the wildland-urban interface and who protects it from fire?**

A: "Wildland-urban interface" refers to those areas where homes are near or intermingled with wildland vegetation and thus are vulnerable to wildfire. The increased presence of homes in and adjacent to wildlands has made firefighting more complicated and more expensive, while also elevated fire risk in some forested areas, since two-thirds of all wildfires are human-caused. Oregon has about 3.5 million acres of wildland-urban interface. ODF protects some interface lands that lie within its forest protection districts, and rural fire departments provide firefighting services to other portions of the interface.

**Q: What role do forest protection associations play in Oregon's wildfire protection system?**

A: In the early 1900s, groups of landowners across Oregon formed forest fire protection associations to safeguard members' lands. Today, three of the associations continue to operate: the Coos and Douglas Forest Protective Associations (CFPA, DFPA), and Walker Range Patrol Association (WRPA). These private, nonprofit corporations maintain their own suppression forces and provide fire protection to forestlands within their jurisdictions. In addition, they educate landowners and local communities in wildfire safety and prevention. These operating associations are an intrinsic element of Oregon's fire protection system. They partner closely with ODF to provide fire suppression and prevention services.

CFPA protects 1.5 million acres of private, county, state and Bureau of Land Management lands in Coos, Curry and western Douglas counties. DFPA protects 1.6 million acres of private, county, state and Bureau of Land Management lands within ODF's Douglas District in Douglas County. WRPA protects approximately 700,000 acres of private, state and county lands in northern Klamath and Lake counties.

Over the years as the other associations went out of business for various reasons, ODF assumed their protection responsibilities. Many of these non-operating associations continue to play an active role today in determining the level of protection, reviewing and approving annual budgets, and providing resources for the overall fire protection system.

**Q: Do wildfire agencies work together?**

A: Yes. ODF, the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service and Oregon's many rural fire departments operate via a "closest-forces" strategy. That is, the agency with available firefighting resources nearest a reported fire will perform initial attack on the fire, regardless of land ownership, and then turn it over to the agency with jurisdiction when its forces arrive. The billings and reimbursements are sorted out later.

In addition, forest landowners are a key partner with ODF in fire protection. They routinely assist by deploying woods workers, heavy equipment and even helicopters to fight fire.

**Q: What are ODF's firefighting objectives?**

A: ODF seeks to suppress 94 percent of all fires at 10 acres or smaller in size. For fires that exceed 10 acres, the aim is to achieve containment by the following day. Despite a long-term climate trend that regularly

pushes fire conditions to extreme levels during the season, ODF firefighters have been successful in meeting or exceeding the standard in most years. This aggressive approach to firefighting is cost-effective. Fires that escape initial attack and grow large are much more expensive to put out than those that are extinguished while still small.

## **Firefighting resources**

### **Q: How many seasonal firefighters does ODF employ?**

A: ODF employs about 700 seasonal firefighters in its districts to perform initial attack on wildfires. These personnel are hired and trained in March, then deployed to the districts. Most work on fire engine crews, responding to reports of fire. Their rapid action stops the majority of fires at small size, many under an acre.

### **Q: What about private contract fire crews?**

A: For the 2009 wildfire season, ODF expects to have from 150 to 200 private contract crews available through an interagency agreement issued by the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group (PNWCG), an association of the state and federal fire agencies of Oregon and Washington. ODF administers the agreement for the PNWCG.

The crews are available for dispatch to wildfires in both Oregon and Washington. Outside the peak period of wildfire activity in the Pacific Northwest, they are dispatched to other states as well.

### **Q: Do prison inmates fight fire?**

A: Yes. For many years, ODF has trained carefully screened Oregon inmates to fight fire. In coordination with the Oregon Department of Corrections, ODF regularly deploys 10-man inmate fire crews to fires statewide. In addition, specially trained inmate camp crews staff the mobile kitchens that feed firefighters at large wildfires and also provide other support functions. Department of Corrections officers accompany the inmate crews wherever they are sent to a fire.

### **Q: Does the Oregon National Guard help to fight fire?**

A: Each summer, the Oregon National Guard makes available helicopters and trained air crews to fight wildfires in the state. In some years, Guard ground firefighting crews have assisted ODF as well. National Guard resources most often are used when the governor declares a state of emergency due to a scarcity of firefighters and equipment available from other sources. In 2009, many Oregon National Guard personnel and aircraft will be deployed overseas. But about 200 soldiers that underwent firefighter training last year are available. Also, several heavy helicopters and their flight crews will be on standby to fight fire.

### **Q: What training do firefighters receive?**

A: All personnel deployed by ODF in ground firefighting crews (including seasonal, private contract, inmate and Oregon National Guard firefighters) must obtain Firefighter II certification. The National Wildfire Coordinating Group-approved training course to achieve certification is 30 hours long and combines field and classroom work. Subjects covered include: use of portable pumps, hose lays, fire line construction, deployment of fire shelters, fire behavior and fire weather, fire line safety, and introduction to the command system used at large fires. A higher level of training is required for fire management and supervisory positions.

### **Q: ODF is fighting a large wildfire near where I live. How can I get a job on it?**

A: At large wildfires, ODF may hire a small number of people on the spot when the need for resources exceeds the available permanent and seasonal ODF employees and private contract fire crews. These "administratively determined," or "AD" employees may be dozer operators, runners (to pick up supplies, et al, at the camp base), or workers assigned to perform in some other temporary capacity at the fire.

## Firefighting costs

### Q: How much does ODF spend on firefighting?

A: Firefighting expenditures vary year to year, depending on the intensity of the fire season. These figures for the past six fiscal years (July 1-June 30) reflect that variation. Fiscal Year 2003, for example, includes the 2002 calendar year season, the most severe in 50 years.

FY03	\$56,913,411	FY04	\$12,323,504	FY05	\$ 2,064,139
FY06	\$22,881,962	FY07	\$12,951,767	FY08	\$12,342,874 (not finalized)

Over the long term, though, firefighting expense has increased significantly. An inflationary trend in equipment and personnel costs, expansion of the wildland-urban interface, and hotter, drier summers have all contributed to the rise.

The various annual costs listed above include the district costs (routine initial attack) paid for by the district budgets, as well as the so-called "extra costs" for large fires (team deployments, extended attack) that are picked up by the landowner-financed Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund. They do not include the costs covered by the special appropriation fund (SPA) that is financed by the Legislature from the state General Fund.

### Q: What is the Protection from Fire Program's total budget?

A: The current biennial budget is about \$116 million. This provides for fire prevention education, smoke management and other functions in addition to firefighting.

### Q: Who pays for firefighting?

A: In Oregon, forest landowners pay a larger share of firefighting costs on privately owned land than in any other Western state. They cover half the cost of ODF's local crews and equipment across the state, and most of the cost of large fires that require resources beyond those available locally. The state's general fund pays the remaining amount, in recognition of the wider public benefits of a system that protects public safety and forest resources. (NOTE: The proposed ODF budget currently before the 2009 Oregon Legislature would modify the cost sharing for regular firefighting expenses from 50:50 to 55 percent landowners:45 percent State General Fund. This will likely be settled by the end of June.)

Specifically, forest landowners pay an assessment for fire protection, and the State General Fund matches their contribution. Also, ODF receives some federal funding. And the State of Oregon has an insurance policy for catastrophic fire losses that provides reimbursement for fire-suppression costs that exceed a deductible.

## Fire restrictions

### Q: What does it mean when an ODF field district enters fire season?

A: Entry into fire season imposes certain restrictions on activities in the forest. These may vary from district to district. Typical restrictions include: forestland burning permit required, extra fire safety precautions on forest operations required, and backyard debris burning permit required. Check with the nearest ODF office for restrictions specific to the local area.

### Q: What does a Regulated-Use Closure entail?

A: When an ODF field district institutes a regulated-use closure, non-industrial activities in the forest are restricted. It does not prohibit people from entering the forest. A regulated-use closure typically includes a ban on use of fireworks, restricts campfires to designated locations, and limits off-road use of motorized

vehicles. In addition, smoking, chainsaw use, mowing of cured grass, and the grinding, cutting or welding of metal are typically restricted.

The districts impose regulated-use closures as needed based on current fire danger. As such, a closure may be invoked on relatively short notice in response to changing weather and fuel conditions.

**Q: What is an Industrial Fire Precaution Level?**

A: Industrial Fire Precaution levels (IFPL) are part of ODF's closure system that regulates timber harvest activity in the forests west of the Cascade Mountains. There are four levels: IFPL 1 imposes the fewest restrictions, and IFPL 4 halts all industrial activity. A detailed description of the levels can be found on the ODF website, [www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/ifpl.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/ifpl.shtml).

## **Fire mobilization**

**Q: What does it mean when the governor declares a State of Emergency due to wildfires?**

A: Among other things, the declaration enables ODF to deploy Oregon National Guard soldiers and equipment to fight wildfires. As a matter of policy, ODF uses other resources first, such as inmate crews, private contract crews, and leased aircraft. Only when those resources are depleted does ODF turn to the National Guard. In severe fire seasons, Guard helicopters and fire crews have played an important role in fighting large fires.

**Q: What happens when the Oregon Conflagration Act is invoked?**

A: Oregon's Conflagration Act was developed in 1940 as a civil defense measure. Historically, the act has been used to protect communities from catastrophic wildfires. When the governor invokes the Conflagration Act, this allows structural fire departments to send resources to other jurisdictions and receive reimbursement from the state. The act has been invoked numerous times in recent years in response to wildfires in the wildland-urban interface.

## **Structure protection**

**Q: Do ODF firefighters protect homes and other structures?**

A: The central mission of ODF's Protection from Fire Program is to protect private and public forestlands from fire. Whenever structures are potentially threatened by a wildland fire, ODF firefighters will attempt to prevent it from encroaching on them. But the direct defense of homes and other buildings falls to the rural fire districts and municipal fire departments, whose firefighters are specially trained and equipped to protect structures. ODF concentrates on perimeter control of wildfires, while structural fire departments focus on protection of individual improvements.

**Q: How can I protect my home from wildfire?**

A: Several organizations offer practical steps you can take to protect your home and property from wildfire. ODF's website is a place to start, [www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/SB360/sb360.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/SB360/sb360.shtml).

- The Firewise Communities program ([www.firewise.org/](http://www.firewise.org/)) is a resource used by agencies, tribes, organizations, fire departments, and communities across the U.S. to reduce the loss of lives, property and resources to wildland fire by building and maintaining communities in a way that is compatible with the natural surroundings.
- Living With Fire is another helpful information source, <http://pnwfireprevention.com/prevention/living/>.

- The FireFree organization also has much helpful information for homeowners and communities in the wildland-urban interface, [www.firefree.org/](http://www.firefree.org/).

## Current issues

### Q: Is global warming making forest fires worse?

A: According to the 2004 Governor's Advisory Group on Global Warming, one of the changes likely to result from global warming is that Oregon forests will become more vulnerable to insects, disease and fire. Whether the hot, dry summers of recent years in the Pacific Northwest are the result of a regional climate trend or global warming continues to be debated. But it is clear that the weather has contributed to intensified wildfire behavior across the region over the past decade or so.

One measure ODF has taken to better cope with severe fire seasons is the use of a legislatively allocated fund commonly known as the "fire severity fund." When extreme fire weather conditions, such as dry lightning storms, are predicted, ODF is able to tap the fund to deploy additional resources and increase its initial-attack capability. This strategy has succeeded in holding down the cost of wildfire suppression and damage to the forest resource.

## Wildfire statistics

### Q: How many wildfires occur in ODF's jurisdiction annually?

A: On the lands protected by ODF, the 10-year average is about 1,100 wildfires burning a total of 24,000 acres annually. In a typical year, about two-thirds of the fires are caused by people and the remainder by lightning. Of the human-caused fires, fewer than half are caused by forest landowners and operators. Because lightning-caused fires often occur in remote areas and involve multiple starts, they usually account for the majority of the acres burned.

Across all forest protection jurisdictions in Oregon, about 2,600 wildfires burn approximately 239,000 acres annually on average.

Other useful wildfire statistics are available at:

- Oregon Dept. of Forestry - [www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/fire.shtml#Fire\\_Stats\\_\\_Info\\_\\_Updates\\_](http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/fire.shtml#Fire_Stats__Info__Updates_)
- Northwest Interagency Coordination Center - <http://nwccweb.us/> (Under Predictive Services, go to Intelligence)
- National Interagency Fire Center - [www.nifc.gov/](http://www.nifc.gov/) (go to Fire Information)
- InciWeb (current information on wildfires nationwide) - [www.inciweb.org/](http://www.inciweb.org/)

### Q: Do forest operators cause most of the wildfires?

A: No. Most human-caused wildfires result from residential and recreational activity, not forest operations. Improvements in timber harvesting equipment, tightened operating rules and an industry-wide prevention awareness campaign have reduced the number of logging-related fire starts.

A guide to the legal requirements for forest operations can be found at:

[www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/guide.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/guide.shtml)

## Forest management and wildfire

### Q: What is controlled burning?

A: Prescribed forest burning (controlled burning), as used by private forest landowners, is the intentional application of fire to a recently harvested area to remove logging slash and prepare the site for replanting of trees.

ODF regulates controlled burning to minimize the potential for a burn to escape and become a wildfire. Also, by monitoring wind patterns, ODF meteorologists are able to schedule burn days when smoke is likely to move up and away from population centers.

**Q: What is being done to reduce the wildfire hazard in Oregon's forests?**

A: An overabundance of dead and unhealthy trees in some forests has created a serious wildfire hazard. While the problem is most prevalent on Oregon's federal forestlands, ODF also works with private landowners to help them reduce this excess fuel loading wherever it occurs. Foresters provide technical advice on how to treat tree stands to improve forest health and lower the risk of damaging wildfires. Additionally, ODF administers federal grants that partially defray the cost of these fuel-reduction treatments.

**Q: What is forest biomass? Is anything being done with it?**

A: Forest biomass includes logging debris, as well as the woody material produced by thinning and brush removal. Thinning is standard practice on private forestlands to stimulate growth of the remaining trees and reduce wildfire risk. Such treatments are also underway on some overgrown federal forests in the state.

Developing markets for forest biomass is a high priority for Oregon's public and private forest sectors. Success would provide economic incentives to expand fuel-reduction programs on the federal lands, thus lowering the wildfire threat they pose to private forestlands as well as rural communities.

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