

NORTHEAST OREGON EAST FACE OF THE ELKHORN MOUNTAINS PARTNERSHIP

“ I think we’re fireproof now. If a fire came through, it’s just going to burn minimally on the ground.

—Dave Mellinger

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PRODUCER PROFILE: Dave Mellinger Union County, Oregon

A few years ago, Dave Mellinger’s woods looked a lot different than they do now.

“You couldn’t walk through here before,” Mellinger says. “The trees were too close.”

“It was full of tall, waxy-leaf brush, which is highly flammable. If we ever had a fire come through, we would have lost everything,” he added.

But now, after entering into a pre-commercial thinning contract with USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Mellinger’s woods are being transformed into a much healthier and fire-resistant landscape.

“It’s well worth getting involved in this thinning project,” Mellinger said. “If the trees are too close together, they won’t get any size to them. Now that we have thinned the forest, the trees that are left will get bigger and healthier.”

Mellinger is one of 52 woodland owners in Baker and Union counties who has signed up for a contract with NRCS through the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project.

Through the East Face project, NRCS provides financial assistance to help landowners implement much-needed forest conservation practices such as pre-commercial thinning and slash treatment. The overall goal of the project is to reduce the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire in at-risk areas along the private and federal forest boundary in the Powder River - Grande Ronde watersheds.





EAST FACE

“Resource problems like wildfire don’t observe political boundaries,” said Mike Burton, NRCS district conservationist for Union County. “That’s why it’s so important for private and public land owners to work together through the East Face project to address the wildfire threat on a watershed scale. No single agency can tackle this problem by itself.”

“NRCS provides a cost share with the landowners to cover a portion of the cost for pre-commercial thinning,” said Nick Vora, NRCS soil conservationist in La Grande. “Our goal is to provide enough incentive to get landowners to do the thinning that desperately needs to be done. The land uses range



from grazing to timber to recreation, but across the board, thinning helps with all of those purposes.”

Mellinger signed up for a three year contract with NRCS to thin 119 acres of his woods. He hired a contractor to do the thinning using a slashbuster—an excavator mounted, high-speed rotary mulching head that grinds the material on the stump. This machine eliminates the need for small, non-merchantable trees to be hand cut and piled into slash piles. In addition, the material left behind acts as a slow release fertilizer on the forest floor.

The Oregon Department of Forestry is providing technical assistance to help East Face landowners like Mellinger develop site-specific forest management plans.

“The main purpose of thinning is to reduce wildfire risk,” says Jana Peterson, ODF field forester. “By thinning the trees, it makes space between the crowns and the stems so the fire has less fuel to carry it. So if there is a fire, we can get in there and put it out easier because we’re not battling 20 foot high flames. Instead, we would be dealing with 1 or 2 foot high flames.”

Forest health is also a significant benefit to pre-commercial thinning.

“Crowded trees don’t get enough sunlight, water and nutrients for each tree,” Peterson added. “So you have trees that die, or stressed trees that make them more

Top: A view of Dave Mellinger’s dense, overcrowded woods before pre-commercial thinning.

Bottom: A view of a different area of Mellinger’s woods following pre-commercial thinning under contract with NRCS.

NRCS photos by Tracy Robillard.



susceptible to disease and insects. For example, mistletoe is a parasitic plant that is a big issue here in Northeast Oregon. We implement a top-to-bottom treatment to target the problem trees with mistletoe. So overall, you are left with a healthier stand that's more resilient and resistant to insects, disease and fire."

Mellinger purchased the 200-acre property on Shaw Mountain in 1989 and has logged it twice in the last 25 years. In addition to timber, the land also provides abundant recreation opportunities for his family.

"This is where we come spend weekends," Mellinger says. "We go camping with my kids and grandkids. It's a place for us to come and get away and enjoy ourselves."

"Now that we've done the thinning, in 25 years of so my family will probably be able to log again," he added. "It can stay right here in the family and continue the cycle."

Several of Mellinger's neighbors have also done pre-commercial thinning work on their forests through the East Face project. Mellinger describes

Top: A slashbuster performs pre-commercial thinning. Below: Landowner Dave Mellinger (left) speaks with NRCS Soil Conservationist Nick Vora. *NRCS photos by Tracy Robillard.*



the collective results across the landscape as a “night and day difference.”

“I think we’re fireproof now. If a fire came through, it’s just going to burn minimally on the ground,” Mellinger says.

NRCS has funding available in 2016 for the East Face project. To apply, contact the USDA Service Center in Baker City at (541) 523-7121 or La Grande at (541) 963-4178.



From left to right: Mike Burton, NRCS District Conservationist for Union County; landowner Dave Mellinger; NRCS Soil Conservationist Nick Vora; and ODF forester Jana Peterson. NRCS photo by Tracy Robillard.

About the East Face Partnership

The East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains project is funded by the Joint Chief’s Landscape Initiative—a collaboration between the chiefs of two USDA agencies, the NRCS and the U.S. Forest Service. The project aims to accomplish goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy by reducing the risk of loss to catastrophic wildfire through forest fuels reduction, restoring and maintaining landscapes, and improving fire response.

The East Face project combines the skills and expertise of the NRCS, the Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agencies are working together to proactively address wildfire issues in the East Face project area with an “All Hands, All Lands” approach—spanning both public and private lands. The project targets fuels reduction

treatments on more than 46,000 acres in the Willowa-Whitman National Forest; 1,224 acres of BLM land; 4,000 acres of ODFW land; as well as adjacent private lands.

The long-term goal is to minimize potential impacts from wildfire on private residences, natural resources, and public infrastructure, while also improving overall forest health.

The East Face project will reduce the impacts of wildfire to the watersheds supplying the irrigation needs of local farmers, and create areas of reduced fuel loadings near the municipal water supplies for La Grande and Baker City. It will also protect key habitat for federally-threatened bull trout, steelhead, and Chinook salmon.

NRCS’ role in the partnership is to provide funding and manage contracts for eligible landowners to implement conservation practices on private lands; while ODF provides technical assistance to private landowners to support the development of forest management plans.

The Forest Service completed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) in October 2015, which provides several alternatives to treat the federal lands within the East Face project area. A final EA is slated for release in early 2016. Work on federal lands may begin as early as summer 2016. For more information about the EA, visit the East Face project website at:

www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace

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More funding is available in 2016. To apply, contact your local USDA Office:

**La Grande Office: (541) 963-4178
Baker City Office: (541) 523-7121**

