

NEWS RELEASE



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Natural Resources Conservation Service



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Assistance available to Baker, Union woodland owners to reduce wildfire risk *Apply for financial assistance by April 15*

BAKER CITY, Ore. – (March 9, 2016) – Private woodland owners in Baker and Union counties can reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and improve forest health with financial support from USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Interested landowners should submit applications by **April 15** at the USDA Service Centers in Baker City or La Grande.

“We want woodland owners to be proactive and help protect our community from wildfire—NRCS has the financial and technical assistance to help them do it,” said Jay Gibbs, NRCS basin team leader. “By doing pre-commercial thinning and slash treatments—and by mixing in some of their own commercial logging—woodland owners can build up natural defenses to wildfire, insects and disease. Plus they can get healthier trees and enhanced wildlife habitat. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

Conservation practices like pre-commercial thinning and slash treatments reduce the amount of “fuels” (such as dense, overstocked trees, shrubs and invasive plants) that cause a wildfire to spread higher into the canopy where it causes the most damage. By thinning the woods to a manageable and healthy level, landowners can significantly reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire while also getting stronger and healthier trees.

NRCS offers financial assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—a voluntary Farm Bill program that reimburses landowners for a portion of the cost to implement conservation practices on private agricultural lands, including grazed woodlands and forests. The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) is partnering with NRCS to provide technical assistance to participating woodland owners. Technical assistance includes helping landowners develop a forest management plan that addresses any specific threats to their property and their personal land-use goals.

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NRCS is providing the funding as part of the East Face of the Elkhorn Mountains Project. This large-scale forest restoration project will reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire on public and private lands in the Baker and La Grande watersheds. The project targets forest restoration activities across more than 20 miles of shared boundary between private, state, and federal lands in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

This is the last year that NRCS and ODF will write new contracts with private landowners through the East Face project, but work will continue on-the-ground for several more years. Most landowners sign-up for three-year contracts so they can complete the necessary thinning and slash treatments over a couple of field seasons.

Since the East Face project began in 2014, private woodland owners have voluntarily signed up to treat more than 4,700 acres in Baker and Union counties. In the last two years, NRCS invested \$2.1 million for 49 contracts with private woodland owners. This year NRCS has up to \$375,000 available for new contracts.

To sign up or for more information about the East Face project, contact the USDA Service Center in La Grande: (541) 963-4178 or Baker City: (541) 523-7121 or visit the NRCS Oregon website at: www.or.nrcs.usda.gov.

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 Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Forest Service. The project aims to accomplish goals of the Cohesive Wildfire Strategy (CWS) 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 Wallowa-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 project will reduce the impacts of wildfire to clean drinking water and fish habitat in the Baker and La Grande watersheds. This includes improving habitat for federally-threatened bull trout, steelhead, and Chinook salmon.

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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.

In February the Forest Service released its final environmental assessment describing proposed treatments on the federal lands within the East Face project area. See the Environmental Assessment and draft decision notice, released February 2016, on the East Face project website at: www.fs.usda.gov/goto/EastFace.