

File Code:

Date: December 12, 2017

Chetco Bar Post-Fire Update

Dear Interested Parties:

This letter provides an update and description of the management of Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER), roadside danger/hazard trees, post-fire restoration and for the management of any associated temporary area or road closures for public safety.

I would like emphasis that evaluation of risk in all areas is an ongoing process and only those areas where risks remain above acceptable levels will stay within closure areas. The necessary work to reduce those risks and re-open those areas is the highest priority.

Background: The Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest had approximately 14% of its 1.8 million acres burn this past summer. The Chetco Bar Fire was the largest burning 191,197 acres of which 170,321 acres were on National Forest System lands. The Kalmiopsis Wilderness and other administratively withdrawn land management allocations comprise 94,447 acres or 55% of the acres burned. Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) activities began in October 2017 to address potential risks to human life, safety, property, critical natural and cultural heritage resources and will continue through most of 2018. On October 27, 2017 a Rapid Assessment Team mostly comprised of Regional Office specialists, made recommendations to the Forest Leadership Team (FLT). After considering all the recommendations of the Rapid Assessment Team, the FLT decided to assign personnel and resources to four focused efforts. The intent is to address potential risks to human life, safety, property, critical natural and cultural heritage resources and to recover marketable value in fire-killed trees before they become unsuitable for processing by local mills. Fuel loading adjacent to private lands from fire-killed trees and opportunities for wildlife habitat improvement projects are examples.

Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER):

BAER projects are currently underway and will continue through next year. Projects include a variety of methods or treatments including land treatments, protection for safety of the public and storm proofing of roads and trails. Examples of BAER activities include road burned area warning signs installed at all planned locations and some new locations have been identified for additional signs as temporary area closures are lifted. Recreation site hazard warning signs have been installed at most locations and others will be installed in the spring. Danger tree mitigation has been completed for the safe ingress/egress of private homeowners and recreation site hazard tree mitigation has been completed at key recreation sites. Burned over recreation site vault toilets have been capped, and the contract is ready to pump vaults and remove burnt infrastructure hazards in December.



The road storm proofing project is on-going and prioritized by risk/need, with work completed on roughly 50% of the road system needing treatment. Relief pipes have been installed at the high risk culvert sites with designs for culvert upsizing being completed. Storm patrols are ongoing as needed to protect road infrastructure from failing due to plugging culverts and ditches from runoff events. These are examples, there are many additional ongoing projects.

Temporary road closures may take place during the implementation of work on roads or culverts, however these will only be for the duration of the work taking place and should only affect a small percentage of the roads within the fire area at one time.

Danger Trees, Public Safety, and Temporary Area Closures

Within the Chetco Bar fire perimeter there are 251 miles of Forest Service roads under the current MVUM. Work has been completed to remove imminent danger trees using emergency authorizations to reopen public access along a high use corridor that accesses private property/residences and popular river access. An updated temporary road and area closure (as of 12/11/17) opens 62% of the previously closed roads and reduces the closure area by 65% to 34,000 acres. The reopened roads and areas were deemed to be a lower risk to public safety based on public's exposure danger trees. This could be due to exposure/traffic levels or the area burned in a low severity fire and most trees are still alive. Signage will be placed to make public aware that they are entering a post-fire environment with higher exposure to hazards. 115 miles of Forest Service roads remain temporarily closed, due to high severity fire effects and large amounts of danger trees, steep slopes, road conditions and other post-fire hazards identified by BAER.

These temporarily closed areas will be the focus for the first of several contracts to remove danger trees, and reopen the roads when the risk has been mitigated. It is anticipated that additional roads will begin to be opened in March as contract work is completed.

Area Salvage

Approximately 13,000 acres have been identified within the Matrix Land Allocation as defined within the Northwest Forest Plan with moderate to high severity (>50% basal area loss) burn. An interdisciplinary team has been identified and an analysis is underway to examine this 13,000 acres for opportunities to harvest dead and/or dying timber in a manner that is consistent with the Siskiyou National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) and the Northwest Forest Plan. The LRMP states the intent to obtain a full yield of timber within the capability of the land (page IV-139) as a Goal for the Forest. The Record of Decision for the LRMP states that the Forest-wide goal is to "Provide balance of resource management that will maintain a healthy Forest ecosystem, and help to supply local, regional and National social economic needs" (LRMP ROD, page 10). The Northwest Forest Plan states, "Most timber harvest and other silvicultural activities would be conducted in that portion of the matrix with suitable forest lands, according to standards and guidelines" (NW Forest Plan ROD, page C-39). The interdisciplinary team's analysis is focused on these desired conditions and a decision is scheduled for May 2017. The Forest is working on a request for an Emergency Situation

Determination (ESD) to meet the desired outcomes within appropriate timelines. The ability to address community concerns and potential future problems such as fire affected fuels near private lands will also be addressed.

Any road closures associated with Area Salvage will be similar to any traditional timber sale and be very limited in nature and duration.

Post-Fire Restoration

Reforestation/planting opportunities are being evaluated within the fire area. RAVG data estimates that 40% (76,000 acres) of the Chetco Bar fire burned in moderate to high severity (>50% basal area loss). Many plantations (thinned and un-thinned) incurred stand replacement fire behavior. Natural regeneration is expected in most areas, some large areas have no conifer seed source available within dispersal distances. Sprouting hardwoods like tanoak, Pacific madrone, alder, and big leaf maple are already sprouting. Without planting, large areas could potentially convert from mixed hardwood/conifer stands to hardwood (tanoak) stands. The exotic pathogen, sudden oak death (SOD) is present within the fire area, and is very effective at killing tanoak. This is a serious concern for the future forests of this area, and planting conifers would be important strategy to promote diversity of tree species in the possible scenario that SOD becomes widespread in the Chetco drainage. In order to meet land management and ecological objectives in all land use designations, we are planning to plant Douglas-fir, redwood, and disease resistant stock of western white pine, sugar pine, and Port-Orford-cedar. We are currently working on developing a planting strategy for the fire, which will determine the acres and locations of where different species will be planted.

Unique habitats within the fire experienced both beneficial and adverse impacts. For example, meadow restoration projects where prescribed fire was planned were burned in the fire and met objectives for these areas. In other areas, redwood groves incurred high intensity fire, likely resulting in mortality of some of these large redwood trees. Epicormic sprouting is occurring in the crowns of many of the redwoods, and this may present an interesting monitoring/research opportunity for us to monitor survival of redwoods that experienced total crown scorch. Below is a list of post fire restoration projects the forest is considering:

- Native grass seeding of prairies and continued maintenance of the prairie habitat
- Maintain favorable, high light environments for rare/fire adapted species like *Iliamna latibracteata*
- Assessment, restoration, and maintenance of white and black oak savannahs within the fire
- Redwood monitoring and planting of redwoods in appropriate sites
- Sudden oak death monitoring
- Planting disease resistant western white pine, sugar pine and POC in serpentine plant associations
- Trail maintenance to keep Kalmiopsis trails open
- Wildlife habitat restoration projects in key habitats

These restoration activities will be unlikely to create any road or area closures unless work were taking place directly adjacent to a road and then it would only be for the time work was taking place.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robert G. MacWhorter', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

ROBERT G. MACWHORTER
Forest Supervisor

cc: