

Post-Fire Salvage Operations

The Committee on Appropriations directed the Forest Service to provide a report regarding its salvage operations. The report is to include, by fire and year for the past 10 years: the number of acres of Forest Service land burned by high-severity fires; the number of severely burned acres proposed for salvage harvest; the number of acres on which salvage harvest was actually performed; and the length of time between the fire being declared contained and (1) the completion of the NEPA process proposing and analyzing a salvage operation; (2) offer of timber sale or stewardship contract to perform a salvage operation; and (3) the number and outcome, if any, of legal proceedings against a proposed salvage operation.

The Forest Service compiled data from 2007 to 2016 (10 years) and provided it in the included spreadsheet. The data were analyzed from a number of official and unofficial sources to provide the most accurate result possible with available data. The results are summarized and explained here (Attachment A).

Acres of forest land burned by high-severity fires. Between 2007 and 2016, 707 large fires burned approximately 12.2 million acres of National Forest System land. Of that total, approximately 4.7 million acres had fires classified as high severity fires – defined as those fires that killed at least 75% of the trees on that land.¹ (Attachment B)

Number of severely burned acres proposed for salvage harvest: During this 10-year period, 129 salvage project decisions were made. It is not possible to determine the number of acres of salvage planned in every decision. We did document 48 project decisions, in which approximately 112,000 acres of salvage were planned.² (Attachment C)

Number of acres on which salvage harvest was actually performed: Approximately 100,000 acres of salvage timber sale contracts were awarded.³ (See “Acres of Salvage Reported Accomplished” total on Attachment A.)

Length of time between containment and completion of NEPA and offer of timber sale or stewardship contract for salvage. While we do not have data on fire containment dates, see the attached spreadsheet detailing the time between fire, NEPA, and sale award. (Attachment D)

¹ Fire information was compiled using Rapid Assessment of Vegetation Condition after Wildfire (RAVG) data produced by the Forest Service Geospatial Technology and Applications Center. This is the most comprehensive and uniform data source that includes fire severity. The database does not have the fire containment date. The data presented includes fires burning more than 1,000 acres of National Forest System land in all Forest Service regions except Alaska. Data for 2016 includes fires larger than 500 acres in the Eastern and Southern regions.

² This data comes from the Forest Service Planning, Appeals, and Litigations System.

³ Acres of salvage harvest were identified using a geospatial overlay of the RAVG data with salvage timber harvest data reported in the Forest Service Activity Tracking System (FACTS).

Number and Outcome, if any, of legal proceedings against a proposed salvage operation. From 2007-2016, 22 lawsuits were filed challenging salvage projects. The Forest Service won 12 cases and lost seven. The remaining three cases are still ongoing. Even in cases that the Forest Service won, delays due to litigation may have affected our ability to sell the timber while it was still merchantable. (Attachment E)