Salvage Harvesting

A position of the Oregon Society of American Foresters

The Oregon Society of American Foresters supports the well planned, timely, and careful use of salvage harvesting after uncontrollable events have killed or damaged large numbers of trees in a forest. Salvage harvesting can mitigate economic losses due to the event, recover useful wood products, reduce fire and safety hazards and create the desired environmental conditions for successful reforestation. Application of scientific principles by professional foresters and other resource experts can ensure that economically viable salvage harvesting will be conducted with proper consideration of environmental and social concerns.

Issue Salvage harvesting has generated considerable controversy, particularly when proposed on public lands. Some people view salvage harvests as a way to use resources that would otherwise be wasted and to generate some economic benefits in impacted communities. Others view salvage harvests as causing additional harm to the environment and some also view salvage and other commercial harvesting on federal forest lands as inappropriate. The discussion has extended to the scientific community, and some debates and research studies have received considerable attention by the news media. Contrasting views about salvage have contributed to major disagreements over such harvesting on public land, including legal actions to prevent or to expedite its use. Actions that delay salvage harvesting are an important issue because damaged trees quickly deteriorate and lose value, which can limit project viability and harvest system options as potential timber revenues decline. Those who invariably oppose salvage thus have an incentive for promoting delays, regardless of the merits of their arguments. However, such delays can not only affect timber values but also impact fuels treatments, insect and disease control, reforestation, and other activities that are often planned in conjunction with salvage operations.

Background Salvage harvesting removes timber from an area that has been altered by an uncontrollable event, such as a wildfire, windstorm or insect outbreak that results in large concentrations of dead and damaged trees. Salvage harvesting is a reactive treatment with the principal purpose of recovering economic value of the trees that have been damaged. Roadside salvage also is vital for both the safety and access of those who live, work or recreate on forest lands. In addition, salvage is a key tool for limiting the spread of insect or disease infestations and for reducing hazardous fuel accumulations. The timeliness of salvage harvesting is imperative because dead and damaged trees can decay quickly and lose substantial economic value, and the control of insect, disease, wildfire and safety hazards can be much more effective.

Since the late 1980's, major wildfires and forest health problems in the West generated numerous salvage harvesting plans on federal lands, many of which were appealed by interest groups opposed to the practice. In 1995 Congress passed the "Salvage Rider" (PL 104-19) to restrict such administrative appeals, an action that sparked further controversy and arguments between opponents and proponents of salvage harvesting. Although the Salvage Rider

expired in 1996, the difference of opinions concerning salvage harvesting continues because of contrasts in philosophy as well as in the interpretation of science related to the issue.

Some scientists believe that human intervention following wildfires should be a low priority and that "natural" recovery of the forest is most appropriate (e.g., DellaSala and others 2006). Although often presented in the language of science, this is largely a philosophically based argument that discounts economic and social concerns. Many other scientists and forestry professionals support active management in appropriate areas after wildfire and other major disturbances, a view that is consistent with a recent survey of Oregonians. These scientists and professionals also recognize the vital role that economic and social benefits can play in community and resource sustainability, which can include the timely development of desirable forest conditions through the careful use of research findings as well as local experience.

Salvage harvesting triggers legal requirements for reforestation, whereas forest restoration following wildfires or other catastrophic events typically is not required by law if no harvest occurs. Although some emergency public funds may be available to mitigate some of the adverse impacts of catastrophic events, the income, labor and equipment associated with salvage harvesting can help support restoration practices. Examples include erosion control, invasive weed control, and active reforestation. This is particularly important on federal lands where a portion of receipts from any harvest is dedicated to forest restoration.

Research on salvage harvesting is somewhat limited and at times the findings of individual studies can appear contradictory. However, forestry professionals can interpret and integrate these findings with their practical experience to develop plans that effectively address environmental, economic, and social concerns, including the impacts of not salvaging. Such plans also typically include some sensitive locations, such as unstable slopes and riparian areas, where little or no salvage is prescribed.

Although the random nature of catastrophic events precludes the preparation of detailed, site-specific plans beforehand, the value of preparing preliminary salvage plans should be recognized and integrated with routine forest planning activities. Finally, an efficient public review and appeal process allows both adequate opportunities for constructive public input as well as timely implementation of approved plans.

Selected References

DellaSala, D.A., and others. 2006. Post-fire logging debate ignores many issues. Science 314:51-52.

Fitzgerald, S.A. 2002. Post-Fire Salvage Cutting and Rehabilitation Treatments. In *Fire in Oregon's Forests: Risks, Effects, and Treatment Options*. S.A. Fitzgerald (ed.). Oregon Forest Resources Institute, Portland, Oregon.

McIver, J.D. and L. Starr. 2000. Environmental Effects of Postfire Logging: Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography. General Technical Report PNW-GTR-486. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland, Oregon. Available at: http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/gtr486.pdf

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