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THE ROLE OF WOOD PRODUCTS IN MANAGING OUR WESTERN NATIONAL FORESTS

According to many experts, approximately one-half of all National Forest lands in the western United States (perhaps 80 million acres) are in desperate need of silvicultural treatment. Stands that once burned at intervals of 5 to 10 years have been protected from wildfires for the past 80 years. These stands are now overstocked and during dry years experience high tree mortality. These stands also have high fuel loads, and the incidence of large high-intensity wildfires is increasing. In many of these stands, the composition has changed from fire-adapted species such as ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir to non-fire-adapted, shade-tolerant species such as true firs and hemlock. Where elk and deer herds once flourished, the herds are in decline.

Something must be done to improve the conditions of our western National Forests, but what management tools will work and who will pay the bill? Restoration work on 80 million acres could cost billions of dollars. In addition, the Forest Service is reluctant to reintroduce fire on a large scale. In fact, the latest draft of the Forest Service Resource Planning Act plan calls for reduced acres of prescribed burning through the year 2050. High fuel loads and the fire-ladder-type branches of the shade-tolerant trees in many of these stands make prescribed burning impossible. So, what is the answer? How can these stands be restored to historical stocking levels, health, fuel loads, and species composition? The answer may well be timber harvest and wood products.

A case study is now underway at Ponderosa

State Park in Idaho. Like National Forest lands throughout the West, Ponderosa State Park has been protected from wildfires for the past 80 years. Where once open parklike stands of large old (400 years) ponderosa pine trees dominated, a dense jungle of understory grand fir and other shade-tolerant trees has invaded. Because of competition, the large old ponderosa pine trees have stopped producing seed. Almost no regeneration of young ponderosa pine trees is taking place. Visibility has been reduced to narrow corridors along roadways, and Park managers fear that wildfire could ravage the park and destroy the old trees. Because of these problems, timber harvest and prescribed burning are now being used to restore the Park to conditions of 100 years ago. That's right! Timber harvest in a state park!

Park managers called upon fire-ecology experts from the University of Idaho, the Idaho Department of Lands, Boise Cascade Corporation, and the Forest Service to develop a restoration plan for the Park. The plan, which calls for thinning from below (removal of understory grand fir and other shade-tolerant trees) and prescribed burning of thinned stands, has been underway for three years. Timber harvest has reduced fuel loads and modified fuel types so that fire can be reintroduced safely. The timber has been sold to area wood-products manufacturers, and revenues from the timber sales have funded the restoration work. Without timber sales, the Park would not have had the money for silvicultural treatment. Restoration work is being performed along roads and trails, near camp-

grounds and picnic areas, and wherever restoration work is most needed. No attempt is being made to hide or shield restoration efforts. Many Park visitors have questioned the use of timber harvest and fire within the Park. However, after Park Interpreters have explained the purpose of the restoration work, literally all visitors have agreed that timber harvest and prescribed burning are the right approach and that the effects are positive.

As in Ponderosa State Park, timber harvest and wood products can play a key role in restoring millions of acres of our western National Forest lands. Whether the management goal is to improve stocking levels, reduce fire hazard, change species composition, improve wildlife habitat, or improve aesthetics, timber harvest and wood products should have a place in the restoration work. But, work must

begin now! Because of drastically reduced timber harvests from National Forest lands, many wood products manufacturing plants have closed across the western United States. Wood products manufacturing provides markets for timber. Without markets for timber, restoration work will be far more difficult. It may already be too late in some areas. For example, wood products manufacturing plants no longer exist in southwestern Colorado and northern Arizona. If restoration costs cannot be offset by timber revenues, the Forest Service would be hard pressed to come up with sufficient funds for the restoration work.

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