



Salvage Harvesting on Public Lands

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 on public forest lands after uncontrollable events have killed or damaged large numbers of trees. 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 current research and well-proven 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 can be controversial, particularly when proposed on public lands. Salvage can be seen as a way to use resources that would soon be lost by decay and to generate economic benefits in impacted communities. Another view is that salvage harvest further harms the environment and/or that commercial harvest on public lands should be highly restricted or eliminated. The discussion has extended to the scientific community, and the news media have given some attention to these debates and related research studies. Contrasting views about salvage have led to major disagreements over such harvesting on public lands, including legal actions either 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 oppose salvage thus have an incentive for promoting delays, regardless of the merits of their arguments and related legal decisions. The impact of such delays can extend beyond timber values to include 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 amounts 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, timely salvage is a key tool for limiting the spread of insect 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 forest pests, 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. The Salvage Rider expired in 1996, but the difference of opinions about salvage harvesting is an ongoing issue because of contrasts in philosophy as well as in the interpretation of the relevant science.

Some people believe that human intervention following wildfires should be a low priority and that “natural” recovery of the forest is most appropriate. Although often presented in the language of science, this is largely a philosophical argument that discounts economic and social concerns. Forestry professionals generally support active management in appropriate areas after wildfire and other major disturbances, a view that is consistent with a survey of Oregonians. In addition to the vital role that economic and social benefits can play in community and resource sustainability, salvage can be planned to favor timely development of desirable forest conditions through 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 harvesting is dedicated to forest restoration.

Research on salvage harvesting and related topics has expanded and forestry professionals can 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 typically include some sensitive locations, such as unstable slopes and riparian areas, where little or no salvage is prescribed. Importantly, knowledge about the ecological functions of dead or damaged trees has grown to the extent that salvage prescriptions can integrate newer guidelines for retaining some trees for habitat and other values.

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

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.

Mclver, 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>

Peterson, D.L. and others. 2009. Effects of timber harvest following wildfire in western North America. General Technical Report PNW-GTR-776. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, Portland, Oregon. Available at: http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr776.pdf

This position statement was adopted by the OSAF Executive Committee on February 25, 2013. The statement will expire February 25, 2018 unless after thorough review it is renewed by the Committee.