

Eastside Forest Health Strategy

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Background

At the May 2021 Policy meeting, members expressed an interest to meet with other interested Policy and CMER members to discuss concerns about forest health and fire in RMZ's and attempt to develop a strategy that could be handed down to SAGE/CMER for further development. An Eastside Forest Health Strategy workgroup was formed and after several meetings from June 2021 to February 2022, the resulting guidance and questions based on stakeholder concerns was created.

Strategy Overview

The Eastside Forest Health Strategy workgroup believes a research and monitoring strategy should be focused on investigating active RMZ management approaches that build on current prescriptions designed to balance disturbance resiliency and resource protection objectives. Current buffers may be appropriate where RMZs are not fire dependent but may not be successful across the entire landscape subject to the FPRs. Determining the where, when, and how of additional management is the responsibility of the AMP and will likely require a multi-scale approach (site, watershed, landscape), close coordination with others, and creativity of approach given diverse ownership/management objectives and limited AMP funding to test alternative prescriptions. Significant public and private funding and efforts have been invested on forest health and fuels treatments in eastern Washington, but this emphasis has been primarily on upslope stands and not in regulatory RMZ's.

It is generally agreed that current eastside RMZ rules are rarely implemented making it difficult to find enough examples to study their effectiveness related to fire and forest health. What we do know based on feedback from stakeholders and analysis of existing condition with the EMEP, is that overstocked, suppressed and stagnant riparian stands are likely to remain in this condition for several decades. Absent of active management, these stands may eventually burn, and this could likely be in catastrophic stand-replacing fire significantly impacting both ecological and monetary values of the RMZ.

The questions discussed by the group fall into one or both of the following categories:

- Research to address pre-fire riparian management to reduce wildfire potential and improve forest health/fire resiliency and,
- post-fire restoration of riparian functions through active management.

The following questions should be considered by SAGE/CMER for guidance when scoping upcoming research:

1. To what degree do the current S/F and Np Rules, when applied to the RMZ, address forest health and fire resiliency?
2. What are the factors limiting implementation of RMZ prescriptions?
 - a. What percentage of the time are landowners applying these Rules?
 - b. What are the operational and forest stand limitations for applying these Rules?
 - c. Are the Rules the limiting factor for whether the prescriptions are applied to the RMZ?
 - d. When RMZ's are being managed and is this primarily based on revenue or for enhanced riparian function?

3. What variable/variables contribute to wildfires entering the RMZ and how do these factors affect fire behavior within the RMZ's?
 - a. Does post-harvest slash management impact the risk of wildfire entering an RMZ?
 - b. How do the fires behave once they enter the RMZ?
 - c. What percentage of landowners are applying PCT to the RMZ?
 - d. Does this vary by landowner class?
 - e. How does hydrology and geophysical characteristics (e. g., stream size, valley confinement, soil wetness, topographic position) influence susceptibility/risk to wildfire?
4. Are WMZ prescriptions applied more often than RMZ prescriptions?
 - a. Are there layout and/or operational benefits associated to the WMZ Rules?
 - b. Could these be used to modify the RMZ Rules to make them easier to apply on the ground while still maintaining similar stream functions/protections?
5. What active management approaches (e.g., prescribed fire, thinning, both) and intensities of implementation are best to achieve fire resiliency and resource protection objectives?
 - a. What stand types/conditions and topographic characteristics (e.g., aspect, valley morphology) would benefit from active RMZ management?