

## When the Fire Came



While not unprecedented, few of us have witnessed fire at the scale and intensity of those that tore through western Oregon in September. After the experiences and images of devastation, stories of community and survival emerged, illustrating how folks rise up and gather together during catastrophically hard times. One such story comes from our client John Marble who along with his wife, Cris, grow grass, cattle and forests in the Calapoia Valley. John's family has been on the ranch in eastern Linn County since 1968.

September of 2020 turned out to be the most challenging month of my entire life here on the ranch. It could have been worse. It almost was.

The country I live in is a low-elevation farm and grazing land that exists somewhere between Marine and Mediterranean on the climate scale. Lately it's been trending more toward the latter, getting a bit hotter and dryer each year. There are thousands of square miles of highly productive conifer forest just uphill from us. One thing about a hot, dry forest: when it catches fire, well, you probably want to step back.

Fires in the high country are not unusual around here. Lightning storms frequently come through in late summer and start a few little fires. We also get quite a few "human-caused" fires. Some of these are purely innocent, things like a spark or

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a backfire from a machine. Others are less benign: campfires, fireworks, cigarettes tossed into the brush. On occasion, there is actual arson involved. Usually, these little fires don't amount to much. Various agencies send crews to extinguish the fire, or we get some rain, or sometimes the decision is made to just let the fires burn themselves out. Many of these fires start in places where you cannot simply drive up the mountain and spray some water on the flames.

On the evening of September 7th, a tremendous wind storm blew in from the east, bringing sixty mile per hour winds and hot, dry, desert air. Almost

immediately, our entire region blew up into a dozen or more serious fires. There were thousands of smaller fires too. Most of these fires were caused by trees and branches contacting power lines. In a very short time there were massive fires burning to the north and south of us, with every fire agency fully engaged. My own local department responded to over thirty calls that first night, and for the next week or so we were busy with all kinds of fire emergencies, including a dozen arson-related fires. Seems like when things get bad, some people just lose their grip on reality.

It wasn't all bad. I got to see people perform at a very high level. I saw people helping their neighbors. Farmers and loggers showed up with fire-fighting equipment. There was

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no official call for help, people just showed up. No one slept much that first few days, and most people began packing, “Just in case”. A large portion of our County was at some stage of emergency:

**Level I: Get Ready****Level II: Get Set****Level III: Run for your life**

By the time my little valley reached Level III (mandatory evacuation) we had been getting ready to run for a couple of days. In fact, the day after the big windstorm, I made a few phone calls and received extremely heartening replies:

“Don’t worry. We will come and get your cattle. How many trailers should we bring?”

And it wasn’t just that. As things got worse, I began fielding calls from people who offered shelter and food for livestock, places to sleep, trucks, trailers, bull dozers...you name it, people were just terribly willing to help. When it looked as though we might actually get completely over run—everything gone—one old friend called to offer a house for us to use as a remote headquarters: “You just move in and stay there as long as you want”. In the end, we were able to camp in a very luxurious “barn” (with bathrooms, running water, electricity) that some close friends rent for weddings. This was just six miles from home, which allowed me to respond to my fire station during the conflagration.

I made the decision to evacuate the cattle just as the Level III was being put into place. All of the secondary roads were being closed to prevent looting and encourage people to leave their homes, but we were allowed access to retrieve the cattle. A fleet of gooseneck trailers showed up at each ranch, each of them manned by top-notch stock handlers. In the end, all of our cattle were loaded and moved away to safety

in just over two hours. There was no fooling around.

The next week or so is kind of a blur. My extended family joined us at the Refugee Barn, turning that into a bit of a family campout. Dogs and cats came along too. We cooked on camp stoves, but having refrigerators and plumbing made for pretty soft living. I simply got up every day and put on my yellow fire clothes, went to my station and waited for the next fire call. I didn’t have to worry about the cattle as they were being cared for by our friends. There wasn’t much to do about any of the properties, as the fire was either coming over that last ridge, or it wasn’t. Our “last stand” was proposed to be a small two-lane county road that would have left half of our holdings in the Black Zone. And that assumes we would have actually been able to stop the fire there. Looking back, this was probably not realistic. If the fire reached that road it most likely would have continued west toward the Interstate highway.

A week or so later all of our cattle were loaded up and brought home, back to the same pastures we had evacuated them from. During the fires we lost one old mother cow, probably to the stress of smoke and transport. We had no loss of property or life, but I did sprout a few new gray hairs. One difficulty I ran into was with settling up for the cost of gathering, shipping, feeding and returning all of those cattle. No one involved in the process would accept any money. As one fellow told me,

“It’s not like you asked for any of these troubles.”

When it was all over my wife and I paused for a few minutes on the deck at a house that has a commanding view of the valley. We talked about what we would have done if the entire place had been burned to the ground: buildings, fences, waterlines, pastures...everything gone. Would we



re-build? Yes. Would we build it back exactly as it was before? Not likely; I would like to think we’ve learned some things along the way. Honestly, the most painful loss would have been the young stands of timber, trees that we planted over thirty years ago. We could re-plant, of course, but those decades of work and growth would simply be gone with the smoke.

One other thought was the recognition that when the next fire comes, we will be ready to share our grass with whomever needs it. And all that extra hay, well, maybe someone will need some of that, too.



A month later, some of this seems like stories from years ago. We’re back to normal, sort of, but I frequently find myself watching the sky and sniffing for smoke. And I think about all of the people I need to call and thank one more time for coming to help us during a terribly difficult time.

One final piece of advice: be thankful for the friends you have. If you don’t have friends, work hard to find some. Take care of those relationships. Someone might need your help one day.

Happy to be back home and grazing!

Thank you to John for sharing his story and allow us to include it here. It was originally published in OnPasture (onpasture.com)

## Log Markets

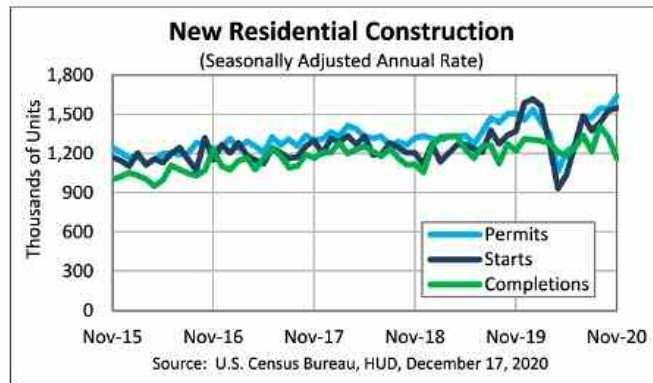
Just like the rest of life has been in 2020, log markets this year were extremely unpredictable. In March when the first Covid outbreaks were occurring in the US, many sawmills in Oregon shut down and the forecast for the log market was fairly gloomy. Domestic Douglas-fir logs were selling for about \$600 to \$650/MBF, but many mills stopped writing purchase orders and projects were put on hold.

It didn't take long for workers across the country stuck at home to start getting busy with repairs and remodeling, and this resulted in a run on home centers the likes of which we have never seen. Lumber became a scarce commodity and prices shot up to record highs. By October, this had translated into about a \$200 increase, up to \$800 to \$850/MBF for domestic Douglas-fir sawlogs in NW Oregon. The situation in the Eugene and Roseburg

areas was more drastic, as lengthy fire season shutdowns there drove log prices up and over the \$1,000/MBF mark.

The market seems to have backed off a bit as we enter winter. Salvage of burned timber is ramping up in areas hard hit by the fires, especially Clackamas, Marion, Linn, and Lane counties, which is resulting in many nearby mills getting nearly overwhelmed with log deliveries.

However, housing starts continue an upward trend this year, and the outlook for 2021 is relatively strong. November housing starts reached an annualized figure of 1.6 million, a level not seen since before the Great Recession.



## Wildfire Risk and Recovery

While no amount of fuels treatment or preparation could have stopped the unprecedented wildfires of this September, we are learning more about how to prepare for the eventuality of future fires, and steps in the recovery of impacted forests. We are also gaining new appreciation that Western Oregon forests and communities are as vulnerable to catastrophic losses as our neighbors in California.

Some simple forest management practices help reduce wildfire risk. Thinning helps maintain tree vigor and reduces moisture stress, especially on harsh sites. Maintaining hardwoods and shrubs helps to fire-proof forests. Developing on-site water sources and having firefighting tools on-the-ready can prove invaluable if a fire threatens. Assess risks and identify resources in a Fire Plan for your forest, and protect critical resources by developing

defensible space. Keep roads cleared and access open to aid firefighters. Make sure culverts are adequate and functioning—flash-floods often follow wildfire, threatening your road system and other structures. Coordinate with your neighbors.

### Recovery Resources

OSU Extension recently launched a new Fire Program, hiring four new regional fire specialists. To quickly address the information void, OSU developed the

After the Fire webinar series to guide owners in the assessment and recovery process. Timely new research from US Forest Service provides guides to assess post-fire tree mortality probability, summarized in a new ODF fact sheet. USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service have been quick to respond with

## Welcome Mindy!

Trout Mountain is excited to announce that Mindy Laird-Garcia will be joining our team as Forester out of our Portland office! We first met Mindy in 2014 when she was working for the City of Forest Grove and she became involved in managing the City's forested watershed. Her interest and background in forestry helped provide an extra set of "boots on the ground" as we worked through several years of harvesting, road work, and invasive plant control projects.



Mindy received her BS in Forestry from OSU, spent a couple years working for the Oregon Department of Forestry, and subsequently has helped manage parks and natural areas throughout the Portland Metro area. Her long-term goal has been to get back into forestry and we are thrilled to have her. She is a very good botanist and has experience working with loggers and forestry contractors. On a personal note, Mindy says "I enjoy spending time in the outdoors, kayaking, camping and exploring National Parks. Being in the forest is one of my passions and I look forward to joining Trout Mountain in 2021."

Please join us in welcoming Mindy to Trout Mountain Forestry.

emergency cost share reforestation programs. Trout Mountain foresters are helping several owners with wildfire recovery. Contact us for more information, or visit the links below.

Contact us for more information or visit the links found here: [bit.ly/PNWWildfire](https://bit.ly/PNWWildfire).



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## Forester Updates

Mark and his wife Dawn recently returned from a 4-week road trip to visit his daughter and friends in New England, and enjoy some fabulous fall colors. They traveled in the COVID safety their small trailer, sharing distanced meals and visits outdoors, and returning home just before the page turned on fall.

Matt and his wife Julia cleared a little space in their nest this fall sending their oldest daughter, Marielle, off to University of Oregon to start her freshman year. In spite of the constraints and uncertainty we've all been experiencing this year, Matt and his family feel very fortunate to be staying healthy and staying outside as much as possible, enjoying what the amazing Pacific Northwest has to offer. With winter here and ski season on, Matt's fingers are crossed for a big snow year!

Shane and his wife Shannon welcomed baby girl Amelia into the world on April 23rd, 2020. Amelia loves doing ALL THE THINGS, including watching the dogs and

chickens and being out in the woods. Shane and Shannon are looking forward to getting her out on skis this winter, as well as the day when she can meet all of our wonderful operators, clients, and colleagues at Trout Mountain.



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