

Timber companies, loggers see major damage from wildfires

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Oregon's timber industry has sustained an enormous setback as massive wildfires continue to ravage forests across the state.

While the full scale of destruction is still coming into focus, groups representing loggers and wood products manufacturers say losses will total in the hundreds of millions of dollars, including charred timberland that will take decades to replant and regrow once the fires are extinguished.

Kyle Williams, director of forest protection for the Oregon Forest and Industries Council, said he is working with members to determine the extent of the damage. For some landowners, he said entire plantations have perhaps gone up in flames.

"It's cataclysmic to consider," Williams said. "You're starting over, effectively."

According to statistics from OFIC, Oregon has nearly 30 million acres of forestland statewide. Of that total, 60% is federally owned, and about 10.1 million acres, or 34%, is private. Yet private forestland accounts for more than three-quarters of the total annual timber harvest.

Wildfires have burned more than 1 million acres across Oregon so far in 2020. Jim Gersbach, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said the agency does not know how much of that is privately managed timber.

"Obviously, it's a big number," Gersbach said.

Privately managed timberland typically runs on a 50-year life cycle from planting to harvest, Williams said. That means it will take about that long for the fire-impacted forests to start feeding logs once again to local sawmills.

"With the size of the footprints that some of these fires are having, we're going to see some of these mills struggling to stay supplied for the next 40 years," Williams said.

Rex Storm, executive vice president of the Associated Oregon Loggers, said his group is also in the midst of surveying fire damage. He estimates about 100 vehicles and heavy machines may have been left to burn on various job sites as the fires spread out of control. They include logging trucks, harvesters and bulldozers.

Just one of those rigs might cost anywhere from \$200,000 up to \$1.5 million, Storm said. That's on top of the already-harvested timber that was also left to burn.

"There's been a significant amount of technology and equipment burned," Storm said. "Some of these machines, it takes two days to move them. You don't bring it home every night."

In the heavily wooded Santiam Canyon east of Salem, the Beachie Creek and Lionshead fires had burned a combined 356,471 acres as of Sept. 14, fanned by high winds and dangerous weather conditions the previous week.

Rob Freres, president of Freres Lumber Co. in Lyons, said all of the company's 415 employees are safe, though some of them did lose their homes in the blazes that devastated nearby communities including Detroit, Mehama and Mill City.

Freres Lumber operates six mills in the area, none of which were damaged, although Freres said the company's 17,000 acres of uninsured private forestland near Detroit Dam and along the Little North Santiam River were "extensively hammered."

Fires also scorched federal land where the company has contracts for timber in the Willamette National Forest, Freres said, further cutting into their future log supply.

"It's going to have a generational impact on our industry and our company," Freres said. "In the near-term, there may be as much salvage (logging) as can be done. We may be able to maintain operations the way they have been historically for the next couple of years. But then we'll have less log supply to run on.

"We have may have to reduce shifts. We just don't know," he added.

With the long-term timber supply reduced, Freres said it may also cause log prices to go up due to increased competition. Despite the challenges, he said the 98-year-old family business intends to stick around however it can.

"The most devastating thing to our community is the loss of life, loss of homes and loss of livelihoods of so many hardworking people who live in the Santiam Canyon," he said. "It's a tragedy of untold proportions. It's really beyond my comprehension at this time. Things will become clearer when the rain comes and the smoke clears."