



## Clearwater-Municipal-Motorway North Complex

### Forestry agency helps landowners assess survivability of fire-damaged trees

When fire moves through a forest, it burns some trees and spares others. But just because a tree is scorched doesn't mean it's dead: Many fire-damaged trees will survive the same way people and animals bounce back from a burn or injury.

"There's not much you can do with a burnt tree but wait and watch," said Chris Gerhart, a private forestry specialist with the Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) in the Clearwater area. Gerhart's job includes teaching landowners how to spot the severity of damage to trees affected by wildfire.

A ponderosa pine, for example, can survive even when 75 percent of its crown is scorched, while a Douglas fir can tolerate a crown scorching of 50 percent. Both species are found in the private, tribal, state and federal timberlands within the boundaries of the Clearwater, Municipal and Motorway North Complex fires.

A tree's bark and roots offer other evidence of a tree's ability to heal, according to Gerhart.

Regardless of species, a tree is unlikely to survive if more than half of its circumference is damaged. A tree in this condition likely suffered heat intense enough to kill its inner bark, where nutrients travel from the leaves or needles to other parts of the tree.

Inner bark that is dry and brown is a sign that the tree won't recuperate; if it's moist green or cream-colored, the prognosis is more positive.

But even a tree that appears only superficially wounded — its outer bark is modestly singed and most of its needles are intact — won't recover if the inner bark of the tree's major structural roots and root collar is brown.

"If the fire doesn't kill the tree, insects can," Gerhart said. "If you have burnt wood, insects will get in and quickly degrade the wood. If you want to salvage the wood, time is of the essence."

Ideally, trees that won't recover should be harvested within six to seven months of the fire — before insects lay their eggs under the compromised bark.

Landowners shouldn't worry that timber purchasers will reject their fire-scorched logs if damage isn't evident after the tree's bark is removed, Gerhart said. Nevertheless, they should inform the buyer that the timber was burned, as each buyer has its own manufacturing specs and char tolerance.

In some circumstances, the Idaho Forest Practices Act requires landowners with more than 10 acres of timberlands to replant areas that don't regenerate on their own. If the landowner can't or doesn't want to replant, he or she can convert the land's tax status. If the cost to replant is beyond the landowner's means, the U.S. Department of Agriculture offers financial assistance through its Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

While bark beetles have a better chance of killing a blackened tree that's also drought stressed, homeowners should avoid watering landscape trees out of season. "In forestry, we don't water trees," Gerhart said. "They have to make it on their own. Watering trees won't gain anything, and it might actually hurt."

The IDL has numerous illustrated materials that can help landowners assess the health of their trees after a fire, whether they're rural homeowners worried about landscape trees or owners of large or small tracts of commercially valuable forests.

In addition, private forestry specialists in Craigmont, Kamiah and Orofino can perform on-site evaluations at no cost — a service subsidized by forest-land taxpayers. Those revenues also support fire-suppression efforts and educational programs that help people build — or rebuild — a home that's properly "firescaped."

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“The proper use and arrangement of building materials and landscape features can increase the likelihood of structures and residents surviving a wildfire,” Gerhart said.

Two publications available at all IDL offices are *Protecting and Landscaping Homes in the Wildland/Urban Interface* and *Living With Fire: A Guide for the Homeowner*.

Property owners who want to schedule a survivability assessment of damaged trees can call Clark Christiansen in Craigmont (208-924-5571), Dave Summers in Kamiah (208-935-2141) or Chris Gerhart in Orofino (208-476-4587).

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