



Central Washington 2012 Wildfires Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) Assessment Update – October 16, 2012

BAER Information: (208) 398-3348

BAER Assessment Update

Wenatchee, WA (October 16, 2012) – The Okanogon-Wenatchee National Forest (NF) Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) report and funding request for emergency stabilization treatments was submitted to the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Regional Office in Portland for approval. The report addresses potential emergency impacts to life, safety, property, and natural and cultural resources in areas burned from the September 2012 wildfires.

The fires which were started by a lightning storm on September 8, consumed approximately 116,612 acres in Okanogon, Wenatchee, Kittitas, and Yakima counties. Of these 116,612 acres, 1,380 acres are Bureau of Land Management land, 16,034 acres are State of Washington land, 11,027 acres are private land, and 88,171 acres are National Forest System lands.

Contracting for and implementation of emergency stabilization treatments will begin on Okanogon-Wenatchee NF lands, as soon as the BAER submittal is approved by its Regional Office. Within the burned areas, the recommended BAER treatments will improve road drainage and stormproof roads at risk of failure from increased flooding, stabilize and repair trails, monitor for and treat invasive weeds, provide for safety emergency signs, and provide for storm patrol of Forest Service roads after rain events.

While most wildfires cause minimal damage to the land, some can cause damage that requires special efforts to prevent future problems. BAER is a program designed by the Forest Service to address environmental damages after a fire such as loss of groundcover, which causes soil erosion, potential flooding and sediment displacement that may put endangered species and community water supplies at risk.

BAER teams are staffed by specially trained professionals, including hydrologists, soil scientists, engineers, biologists, botanists, archaeologists and others who evaluate the burned area and prescribe treatments to protect the land quickly and effectively. BAER treatments can only take place on National Forest System lands and the Forest Service must demonstrate that the treatments are proven and cost-effective.

On the Okanogon-Wenatchee NF, the BAER team examined the effects of the fire on the watershed response and determined potential impacts to threatened and endangered species, archaeological and cultural sites, homes and structures on adjacent private lands, forest roads, hiking trails, water quality, invasive plants, Chinook Salmon, Upper Columbia Steelhead and Bull Trout in stream channels within the burned areas, and recreational facilities and trails.

While the highest percentage of high soil burn severity is located within the Table Mountain Fire (32%), the majority of the burned areas appear to have unburned and low soil burn severity, leaving many trees with green canopies:

Fire Complex	Unburned	Low	Moderate	High
Wenatchee	47%	35%	13%	5%
Okanogan (includes Goat Fire)	48%	34%	11%	7%
Yakima	90%	1%	0%	9%
Table Mountain	36%	19%	13%	32%
Total	44%	28%	13%	15%

Many of the areas that were burned were located in designated wilderness areas. Wilderness areas lack infrastructure and buildings, leaving fewer values at risk. There are fewer roads in these areas, while many of the roads that were in the remaining burn areas will be storm proofed through culvert removal, or installing additional rolling dips to protect against flooding.

The treatments prescribed in the BAER assessment report primarily focus on severely burned areas where water run-off will be excessive in order to manage threats to life, safety and property. The BAER assessment team also recommended that during rain storms, crews will patrol Forest Service roads within and downstream of the burned areas. The storm patrol crews will identify road problems such as plugged culverts and washed-out roads to clear, clean, and/or block those roads that receive storm damage.

Due to the steepness of the burned areas within the National Forest, the first priority and most effective treatment is to manage to protect life and property. The BAER team recommended continued Forest Service area closures in many of the burned areas for public safety. BAER team specialists did not recommend the use of mulching or seeding as a treatment due to the topography of the burned area and the very low expectation that this treatment could be effective. Many of the burned areas are either relatively flat or contain slopes of 60 percent and greater, neither of which are typically considered to be effective for BAER mulching treatments.

All private and commercial property, and county and state road systems downstream from severely burned areas are at risk of increased flood flows and sedimentation, but some areas are at greater risk than others.

The BAER team is working with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and looking at the full scope and scale of the situation to reduce the potential threats to life and property. NRCS is also working cooperatively with the counties, cities and communities adjacent to and downstream from the burned areas to evaluate potential threats to specific businesses, homes, and landowners.

Federal assistance to private landowners is the primary responsibility of the NRCS through the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program (<http://www.wa.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ewp.html>).

Chelan County and Kittitas County Conservation District are sponsoring EWP grants and are working with NRCS to assist private landowners with damage survey reports and recommended emergency measures (http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1045263.pdf).

NRCS is also coordinating a workshop with Washington State University that is tentatively scheduled for October 25. The "After the Burn" workshop will provide private landowners and business owners an opportunity to gather information regarding what actions they can take to protect themselves and their property from a variety of local agencies.

The September 2012 wildfires were a major impact for the Wenatchee Valley communities due to the smoky conditions that persisted until this past weekend's rain system moved into the valley.

"We truly appreciate everyone's patience and cooperation as we go through this recovery process," said Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest Supervisor Becki Heath. "Even though the majority of the September 2012 wildfires are fully contained, there is still a great deal of work ahead to ensure the safety of Forest visitors who enjoy this scenic part of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest."

If you have further questions about the BAER report, contact the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest at (509) 664-9200 or visit <http://inciweb.org/incident/3292/>.

Central Washington BAER Team information is available at <http://inciweb.org/incident/3292/>.
Also, follow us on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/OkaWenNF>.

