

Poll Shows Support for Watershed Forest Restoration



The Ashland watershed, part of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, is a source of abundant, clean drinking water and recreational opportunities for Ashland, Oregon's 20,000 residents. (c) Outdoor Exposure Photography

Forest management advocates in southwestern Oregon were pleased to see the results of a public survey of Ashland residents earlier this year. The study found a high level of support for fuel reduction goals as well as the tools commonly used to accomplish fuel reduction in this region.

“Collecting social data was a high priority for the partners, and a logical extension of our Rogue Basin Fire Learning Network activities” said Darren Borgias of The Nature Conservancy, which contracted with Southern Oregon University researcher Mark Shibley to conduct the study. “First, we wanted to measure the effectiveness of the Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship project’s outreach efforts. Second, we needed to gauge the level of public support for AFR itself, and third, we wanted to see if our research on fire history and historical forest conditions would shape community opinion about restoration in the region.”

Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project

This 10-year project, launched in 2010, will reduce the risk of severe wildfire in the watershed and protect water quality, older forests, wildlife, people, property and quality of life.

The partners are thinning small trees from the overly dense forest, and controlled burning is being employed to reduce fuel levels and improve forest health. Priorities include:

- Saving the largest trees;
- Preserving habitat for wildlife dependent on older forests;
- Preserving stream-side habitat, thereby ensuring water quality; and
- Protecting unstable slopes and erodible soils.

LOCATION ■ National forest lands adjacent to the City of Ashland in southern Oregon. Part of the **Rogue Basin FLN** landscape.

AREA ■ 22,000 acres (7,600 to be treated)

PARTNERS ■

City of Ashland
Lomakatsi Restoration Project
Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest
The Nature Conservancy

FOR MORE INFORMATION ■

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The survey to date has cost \$7,800, and it provides baseline data for a longitudinal study to track change in public opinion over time as research, restoration treatments and multi-party monitoring progress.

Box 1. Key Findings of the Ashland Forest Resiliency Poll

- The most important values are (1) natural beauty, (2) recreation and (3) municipal water supply;
- 75 percent of respondents believe in the likelihood of severe fire in the watershed within 5 years;
- Only 10 percent believe the watershed forests are unhealthy;
- The highest management priorities for Ashland Creek Watershed are (1) protecting the municipal water supply, and (2) reducing wildfire risk; and
- A strong majority of respondents do not believe that historical forest conditions should inform management.

Download the full report of the survey's findings at: <http://bit.ly/AFRrpt>.

The Ashland Forest Resiliency Stewardship Project (AFR), initiated in 2010, is a 10-year project to restore a portion of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest that is adjacent to the City of Ashland. AFR's restoration work really ramped up in 2012 — the group has overseen ongoing forest management projects in the watershed this year — and the AFR has ramped up its outreach work accordingly. The group uses a website, media outreach, Facebook and public tours to keep residents informed about the project.

Key Findings

Two of the first questions of the survey, which was completed by approximately 600 residents of Ashland and the surrounding area, were designed to elucidate what people valued most about the Ashland Creek Watershed. The aesthetic beauty and perceived naturalness of the area, and the fact that the forest is an important water source and recreation area topped the list. This is key information for communicators, who can adjust outreach materials and messages to emphasize those values, and make sure they are reflected in the project as it unfolds.

Several questions probed residents' beliefs related to wildfire risk and forest condition. While nearly three-quarters of residents believe the chance of a large-scale, high severity fire occurring in the Ashland Creek watershed in the next five years is "somewhat" or "very" likely, fewer than 10 percent believe forests are "some-

what" or "very" unhealthy. Moreover, nearly half of respondents were unsure that forests prior to settlement were more open than they are today.

Protecting Ashland's municipal water supply and reducing wildfire risk are residents' top management priorities, followed by preserving old growth and protecting wildlife habitat. When asked about the goals of forest restoration, 96 percent of respondents believe that restoration should promote well-functioning ecosystems, and about 80 percent believe that restoration should recover native plant and animal species and reduce fuel accumulations. Only 41 percent of respondents indicated that restoration should return forests to pre-European settlement conditions.

A "Green Light" for Public Land Managers

Borgias is encouraged by the study's findings. A resident of this liberal-leaning, well-educated community since 1987, he's seen several Forest Service projects in and around the watershed held up by groups who were opposed to active management, especially anything with a commercial component. "This study indicates to me that perhaps the resistance has been from a vocal few, but either way attitudes are supportive now. Mark's findings should give managers a green light to move ahead more confidently with projects that include the careful use of

commercial thinning and prescribed fire."

Borgias also credits AFR and its inclusive collaborative process with increasing the public's comfort level with projects on Forest Service lands. In addition to helping the AFR collaborative, the survey findings will inform restoration across the larger Rogue Basin Fire Learning Network landscape. "We've been able to support similar ecological thinning and burning on City of Ashland inholdings in the National Forest with funding through the Scaling Up to Promote Ecosystem Restoration program."

According to Eleanor Morris, senior policy representative with The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Campaigns team, public opinion surveys can be invaluable to projects such as this one. "It's important to collect the information that allows you to meet people where they are. To learn what they know, and what they care about. In this case, while we as conservationists might care a great deal about restoring forest structure and composition to more closely match historical conditions, it's clear that Ashland residents don't care about that very much. They are focused on other watershed values, especially reducing risk from wildfires. So you shift your messages to emphasize those things." Borgias quipped, "We're in this together, and we're *all* learning."



The Fire Learning Network is a cooperative program of the Forest Service, Department of the Interior agencies—Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service—and The Nature Conservancy. The partnership has a ten-year track record of helping to restore our nation's forests and grasslands and to make communities safer from fire.