

Shifting the Management Paradigm on the O&C Lands of Western Oregon

By Denise Barrett

Founded in Roseburg in 2015 on the basis of trust, Forest Bridges is a grass-roots, charitable nonprofit collaborative that brings together people of different perspectives on forest management to foster sustainable forest health and habitats through active management and restoration solutions on the 2.9 million acres of Oregon and California Railroad Revested Lands (O&C) in western Oregon. O&C



Lands are managed by the Bureau of Land Management in accordance with the O&C Act of 1937's sustained yield priority.

The Forest Bridges collaborative structure includes a Board of Directors (the core decision-making body with a balance of conservation/recreation and forest industry representation), a Council of Advisors, an Independent Scientific and Ecocultural Reviewers Group and a small paid staff.

The organization, which became a 501(c)3 in 2019, sees itself as 'attempting to fill a void' as the only all-inclusive, consensus-based grassroots collaborative

working to shift the management paradigm on the whole of the western Oregon O&C Lands and move beyond decades of polarization, an entrenched culture of litigation, and land allocations that have impinged the scale of active management and restoration efforts needed to address more than 100 years of fire suppression. These and other issues have contributed to exacerbating detrimental conditions on the O&C Lands, which include increasing high-severity wildfire (six to seven times higher than precolonial times in southwest Oregon dry forests according to The Nature Conservancy); increased climate change-driven drought and invasive species; protracted seasonal wildfire smoke impacting public health; declining rural economies; and reduced public access for recreation.

Over the years, the Forest Bridges collaborative has risen to the challenge of developing management principles and approaches that are constructive and viewed as reasonable from the perspective of all our partners and interest areas: Tribal Nations, ecological and climate resilience, legacy forests, plant, wildlife and other biological habitats, timber and wood products production, county revenue expectations, recreation, and other material and non-material values important to the community at large.

How to shift a paradigm

Based on cutting-edge science, time-honored Indigenous Knowledge and practices, and field practitioner experience, Forest Bridges' collaboratively developed Principles of Agreement (<https://www.forestbridges.org/>) provide direction for key areas of management—as well as barriers to management—that need to be addressed to help reverse the negative trends on the O&C Lands. These are buttressed by Forest Bridges detailed Active Conservation Forestry proposals of viable active forest ecosystem management approaches that:

- address climate change impacts head on, adding biomass and sequestering more carbon over time;
- build fire-resilient forests and lower annual public health smoke threats;
- improve and sustains forest health and multi-species habitats;
- protect legacy old-growth trees, while supporting the progression of forest aging over time; and

Forest Bridges' Active Conservation Approaches: A Snapshot

All of the O&C Lands are included in Forest Bridges long-term proposals for the O&C Lands without predesignated reserve locations, which replicates the Tribal ways. This approach would require a shift from the current BLM 2016 Resource Management Plan for western Oregon's land designations, which leave 80 percent of the O&C forests in reserves with little or no management. Forest Bridges views the BLM's current forest management approach as unsustainable in the fire-adapted O&C forests that are overstocked, low in heterogeneity, and facing unprecedented disease and stand-replacing fires. As we see it, agency staff must be entrusted to evaluate stands across the O&C Lands for treatment or "let grow as is" based on each stand's potential to become or remain a contributor to the diversity of wildlife, plant kingdoms or other biological habitats, as well as to store carbon and resist wildfire.

On the O&C Lands' over-stocked dry forests, Forest Bridges aim is to restore historical widely spaced, fire-resistant stands and forest structure for multiple and sensitive species. Toward our consensus goal of reducing the occurrence of stand-replacement fires from the current rate of about 36 percent to just 5 percent, we propose an aggressive fuels reduction program using variable retention thinning and carefully applied prescribed fire and pile burning. Using this dry forest restoration approach on 3 percent of the total 1.4 million O&C dry forest annually over a 30-year timeframe will develop and sustain multi-species habitats, while retaining legacy and generating early seral communities, and increase wood output over current levels.

On the 1.5 million acres of coastal and inland moist O&C Lands, Forest Bridges recommends a metered use of Variable Retention Regeneration Harvests (VRRH), a combination of continuing active and let-grow management, to double the current stock of structurally complex old-growth forests from their current composition of less than 25 percent in moist forests to 50 percent over time, while regularly creating early seral habitats. VRRH and/or thinning overly dense and younger stands, particularly those surrounding structurally complex old growth in a section, we see as important to reduce the fire risk to these stands, especially given current science showing that moist forests are less drought-adaptive in this era of climate change. Active Conservation management on all of our forests centers on enhancing complex forest structure, ecosystem functionality, fire resilience, and the presence of diverse, endemic species, as needed.

- support revenue to the O&C counties and improve rural economies.

The organization looks to Cultural Burning practices, partnering and comanagement opportunities with Indigenous Tribes, on their terms, as integral to its proposals. We see our proposed outcome of multi-species habitats across the O&C Lands, accomplished through restorative fuels reduction treatments over the next 30 years on the dry forests, along with light touch Variable Retention Regeneration Harvest management in the moist forests over the longer term, as harmonizing well with a dependable sustained yield.

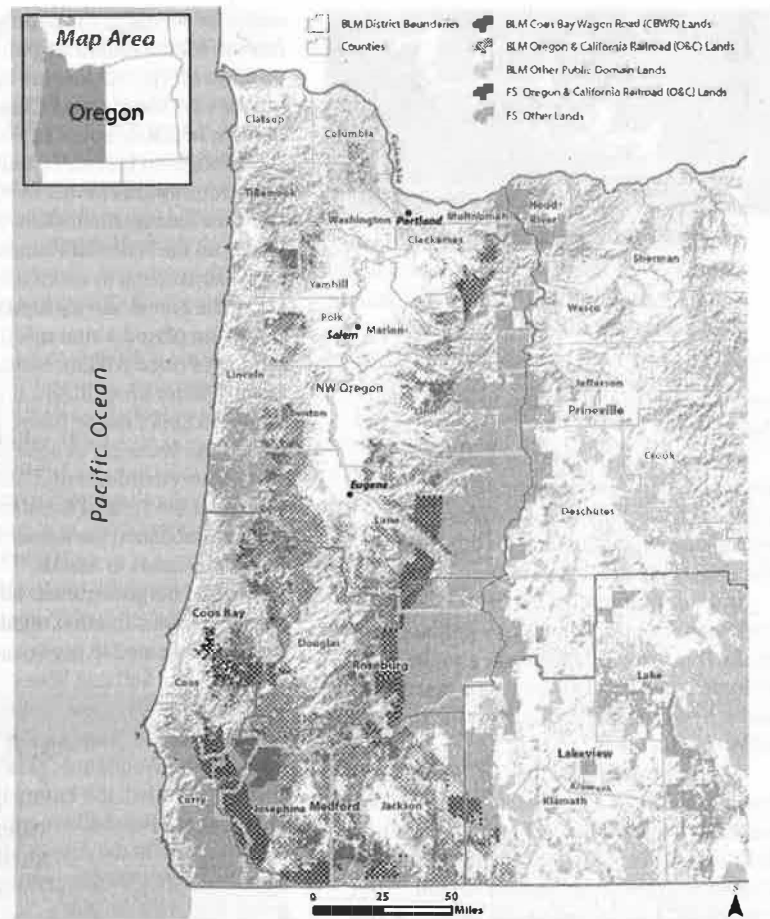
Our Active Conservation Forestry proposals are contained in "living" forest management policy/technical papers—currently for the dry and moist O&C forests (in summary or adapted forms, available <https://www.forestbridges.org/our-project>). In addition to these two technical papers, Forest Bridges intends to produce one on O&C transitional forests, which occupy a large portion of the O&C lands and are characterized by historic fire intervals intermediate between classic moist and dry forests.

These papers are intended for land management agency planning, as well as legislative concept development, as needed. Between 2011 and 2013, two attempts at federal legislative fixes for the O&C lands were drafted. Proposed and led by US Congressional leaders and formulated by individual experts rather than through collaboration, these proposals failed to gain traction due to multiple group opposition. Forest Bridges believes that federal laws and regulations should guide management. However, in the event that they prevent management activities that will promote and sustain in the long-term plant and wildlife habitat diversity to support the range of endemic species on the checkerboard O&C Lands, Forest Bridges will seek to change these federal laws and regulations, along with how O&C forestry is funded.

Achieving goals through public participation

While Forest Bridges considers developing legislative solutions, we have leaned forward in utilizing our proposals to influence the BLM's resource management planning on the O&C Lands. For example, in August 2023, Forest Bridges submitted to the BLM Medford District's Cascade Siskiyou National Monument planning process an adapted version of its O&C Dry Forest management strategies as a Forest Bridges proposed 'Active Conservation Management Alternative.' The monument contains around 114,000 acres of O&C and other BLM-managed lands that are mostly dry forests with some moist refugia. Due to the risk of high-intensity, stand-replacing fires on these lands, we found it particularly important to submit our adapted dry forest proposals geared toward building struc-

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SOURCE: THE OREGON AND CALIFORNIA RAILROAD LANDS (O&C LANDS): IN BRIEF
O&C Lands lie in a checkerboard of ownership together with private, state, local and other federal lands in 18 counties of western Oregon. Forest Bridges includes in its definition of the O&C Lands around 2.1 million acres of O&C BLM lands, 75,000 acres of Coos Bay Wagon Road Lands, 239,000 acres of the BLM public domain lands in western Oregon, and around 500,000 acres of O&C controverted lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service. These lands are governed by the O&C Act of 1937 and other federal laws and regulations.

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turally complex old growth, fire resilient forests, as well as sustaining younger age classes on this sensitive, bio-diverse wonder. We also urged the BLM to prioritize the application of our restoration approaches on an accelerated timeline of 3-5 years following plan approval.

In late 2023, we released a summary of our full-length *Forest Bridges' Moist Forest Active Management Proposal for the O&C Lands of Western Oregon*. We intend to submit a proposed Dry-Moist-Transitional Active Conservation Management alternative to BLM once the Oregon/Washington State Office formally invites the public to contribute comments to its process for updating the Resource Management Plan (RMP) for Western Oregon. We anticipate the process opening to the public during the first half of 2024.

In addition to these efforts, Forest Bridges is also working with other organizations to help remove barriers to the use of prescribed fire as an essential wildfire mitigation/fire resilience-building tool (combined with thinning and other treatments) in fire-adapted forests such as the O&C dry forests. As a member of a national prescribed fire coalition, Forest Bridges has advocated to Congress and the EPA for the EPA to ease the burden of the current exceptional events rule governing prescribed fire use, as well as to develop a system for differentiating prescribed fire smoke from other pollutants (known as speciation) under the PM2.5 regulation, which is currently being updated. We see allowances for the smoke generated by prescribed fire, and in more well-timed, controlled ways in accordance to Tribal practices, as a short-term risk for a long-term gain: dramatic reductions in both the current frequency of high-severity wildfires and protracted periods of wildfire smoke.

As a new member of the Oregon Prescribed Fire Council in 2023, we advocated for new legislation to address training and capacity issues, as well as liability constraints, for prescribed fire users (e.g., 'burn bosses') on private and public lands. With both state and federal advocacy, we have promoted inclusion and financial support of the Tribes as



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOREST BRIDGES

As part of the collaborative process, Forest Bridges staff and volunteers have engaged BLM staff in the field to discuss management approaches and see the results of earlier treatments.

critical partners in advancing the use of beneficial fire on their homelands, which include the O&C Lands.

Looking ahead, and in addition to its core policy work as described, Forest Bridges seeks to expand its public base of support, known as Friends of Forest Bridges, who can support our Principles of Agreement and our collaborative efforts to shift the management paradigm on the O&C Lands. They believe, as we do, that future generations deserve O&C Lands that are biodiverse, wildfire-resilient, climate change-adapted, and supportive of vibrant rural economies, both in the forest and in the utilization of wood. *WF*

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2024 OREGON SAF ANNUAL MEETING

Forestry's Changing Landscape: How Do We Meet the Challenge? May 8-10, 2024, Ashland Hills Hotel, Ashland, OR

The Oregon Society of American Foresters and the Siskiyou Chapter invite you to attend the 2024 Annual Meeting, May 8-10, at the Ashland Hills Hotel in Ashland. The last time the Siskiyou Chapter has hosted the annual meeting was 20 years ago, they look forward to hosting foresters and other resource professionals for the meeting!

This year's theme is "Forestry's Changing Landscape: How Do We Meet the Challenge." Forests are dynamic; shifts in the social, ecological, and the economic landscape provide unique challenges put new opportunities and solutions. Join us as we provide general and concurrent technical sessions, field tours to the Douglas-fir mortality in Southern Oregon, and celebrate the many accomplishments of the members!

Final schedule and agenda will be coming shortly as will the registration prices.

Visit <https://forestry.org/2024-osaf-annual-meeting/>



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