

Learning from the flames

Bland Fire: Students educated about effect of fire on Bland Mountain

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DAYS CREEK -- Standing in the carnage of the Bland Mountain Fire, 13-year-old Tyler Drennen looked at the area in awe.

"I've been at this spot before," said the Canyonville School eighth-grader.

Only last time, the slopes were blanketed with green trees.

Drennen was one of several dozen middle and high school students from southern Douglas County who took a field trip to the heart of the 4,705-acre Bland Mountain Fire No. 2 -- the bottom of the canyon where Lavadoure Creek flows. On Aug. 20, a summer afternoon wind fed flames and sent them roaring through the canyon, scorching almost everything in their wake.

The field trip is part of the first major educational program put forth by Alder Creek Children's Forest, a 78-acre nonprofit educational forest a mile outside of Canyonville.

The founder of Alder Creek Children's Forest, Jim Proctor, a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is developing his parents' property into the educational forest in their memory.

Proctor is president of the eight-member board, which shares a goal -- to spark interest in natural resources at a young age in hopes today's young people will transcend the polarization that has characterized the past decade and make informed, sustainable land management decisions in the future.

Tuesday, Todd Buchholz, a board member for the project and a fisheries biologist with the Umpqua National Forest, tried to engage the distracted group of kids in a conversation.

"What do you see when you look around you?" he asked.

"Burnt trees and dust," offered 13-year-old Joseph Coffey, an eighth-grader at Canyonville Middle School and one of many in the crowd with a parent who works in the timber industry.

The description was fitting.

Steep slopes slid skyward on either side of the creek, barren of all underbrush and most trees, except for occasional standing and fallen shells that had been stripped of their needles and branches. Life grew back in a green strip hugging the creek.

The spot was part of the more than 1,700 acres of BLM land that burned. Another 750 acres burned through Roseburg Forest Products land, with the rest affecting smaller private landowners.

The troop made a second stop farther north to a less severe area, where flames had darted and jumped, leaving patches of green or

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Fire scene

U.S. Forest Service fisheries biologist Todd Buchholz talks to a group of Douglas County students Tuesday on a field trip to the site of August's Bland Mountain fire between Days Creek and Tiller.

STEPHEN BRASHEAR / N-R staff photos

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lightly burned trees.

BLM representatives discussed the pattern of the fire. Buchholz and Alan Baumann, another board member and Forest Service employee, talked about balancing economic and environmental values for restoration. They asked students to guess how much a tree was worth for a logger, and how much it was worth to a woodpecker.

Later this month, students will take a second trip to see devastation on a smaller scale, where some trees on the Alder Creek property have been damaged by insects.

The field trips will help give students background for a forum set for the end of the month. The topic will be "managing mortality," and a range of speakers has been invited, from representatives of the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service to the conservation group Umpqua Watersheds and Superior Lumber Co. of Glendale.

Support for the forum came from the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, the Oregon Forest Resources Institute and the city of Canyonville.

The field trips and forum will come together to help students understand the different types of management problems and present them with various solutions. Eventually they'll be able to make some management decisions on the educational forest.

"We're trying to let the kids formulate their own opinions," Buchholz said.

His hope: that students will see the possibilities for their future.

"It's really cool to see those lights come on and say, wow, school is important, and here's an end to a means."

Al Springer, a board member and Riddle's charter school director, has been incorporating the educational forest into the curriculum for a forestry class. This fall, students have visited the forest to learn tree identification and the structure of the forest.

He hopes the experience will help them to think for themselves and boost their confidence as they learn to make their own management decisions.

"Instead of waiting till they graduate high school, I want to give them as much basic information as I can," he said.

After all, he said, managing natural resources is going to be increasingly important.

"It's going to be a major issue as long as we live here."

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Curious

Canyonville Middle School eighth-grader Kim Stalford, 13, left, and Tiffany Brewer, 13, ask questions Tuesday during a field trip to the site of the Bland Mountain Fire. **STEPHEN BRASHEAR / N-R staff photos**