



# The Woodland Steward

Asotin County Conservation District

Forest Health and Management Newsletter

December, 2025

www.asotincd.org

## The Secret Life of Dead Trees

Snags, large down logs, brush piles, and big decadent trees provide food and shelter to more than 40 percent of wildlife species in PNW forests. Dead trees provide wildlife and insect habitat, host micro-organisms, enhance soil nutrients, create microsites for young trees, and increase water retention in forest soils.

Forests naturally include some trees that have succumbed to pests, storm events, or old age, and some disease, decay, and tree death is normal in a healthy forest. Dead trees are hotspots of biodiversity and biological legacies.

***“A tree in the forest can persist twice as long in it’s death as it did in life.”***

For example, if a tree is 100 years old when it dies, it may take over 200 years to fully break it down into the ecosystem. Considering the long-lived nature of dead trees, retaining high-quality woody debris, snags, and logs is critical to sustaining your forest ecosystem.

Consider adding in some habitat elements by installing “habitat piles” or “bio-dens” in your forest stand. With the correct placement, sizes, and densities of habitat elements, wildfire hazards can be mitigated while forest health and resilience increases.



## Habitat Piles

Wildlife habitat piles are built with logs, small trees, limbs, and boughs – often with materials that are a byproduct of management activities or storm-related debris.

These “critter condos” provide some of the functions of large down logs found in older forests. Wildlife such as songbirds, voles, chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, salamanders, frogs, lizards, snakes, and insects use piles as dens or nesting spots, to shelter from bad weather, to escape predators, and to forage.



Photos (Above and Right): Examples of wildlife habitat piles constructed using materials cut during forest management activities. Habitat piles are designed and placed carefully to support specific types of wildlife including: birds, mammals, macroinvertebrates, and amphibians.

## Pest and Disease Outbreaks: Why are my trees dying?

Washington forests are subjected to a wide variety of pests, pathogens, and diseases, including: fungal agents, insects, mistletoes, and wildlife. Many pests are native to the region, and our trees have coevolved with these pests to develop resistance and defenses to attacks. A healthy forest can defend itself from pests and pathogens, while an unhealthy forest is almost certain to be adversely affected.

Tree diseases may decay wood, inhibit tree growth, and cause excessive tree mortality across large swaths of forestland. Severe outbreaks will increase wildfire hazards, create unhealthy forest conditions for plants and wildlife, reduce timber values, and degrade ecosystems and their ability to resist future attacks.

All parts of a tree, including roots, stems, branches, and foliage, can be infected by the different organisms that cause disease, which results in different impacts to tree health.

## Common Causes of Tree Damage:

BIOTIC			ABIOTIC		
Insects	Pathogens	Wildlife	Human-origin	Weather	Other
Bark beetles	Root disease fungi	Bears	Herbicides	Drought	Fire
Wood borers	Dwarf mistletoes	Ungulates	Air Pollution	Wind	Poor soil
Defoliators	Canker-causing fungi	Rodents	Displaced soil, construction	Frost	Nutrient imbalances
Terminal and shoot borers	Stem decay fungi	Sapsuckers	Soil compaction	Flooding	Landslides
Root feeders	Other brooming agents		Poor planting technique	Winter desiccation	Avalanches
Sucking insects and mites	Foliar pathogens		Off-site seed source	Temperature extremes	
				Lightning	
				Snow, ice	

## Forest Management: Treatment and Prevention

Active forest management is the key to preventing disease outbreaks and creating resilience. Sustainable thinning, pruning and slash management will create a resilient stand structure by adding spaces and gaps, retaining trees of all age classes, and selecting healthy site-adapted trees. Trees that have more space, light, water, and nutrients are more likely to resist attacks from pests with minimal damages (WA DNR, [www.dnr.wa.gov](http://www.dnr.wa.gov))

## Diagnosing Forest Pests and Pathogens:

Diagnosing which pest is killing your trees is based on symptoms, signs, patterns, and context. Sometimes several agents will be present, making it difficult to identify which pest is the “nail in the coffin” for your trees. Remember that some pests and diseases only affect certain species of trees.

- 1: Identify the affected tree species.
- 2: Observe the signs and symptoms on individual trees.
- 3: Think about the patterns and context of your forest stand.



Photo: Western Pine Beetle signs include “wandering” beetle galleries that are unique to this pest, hosted by Ponderosa Pine.

**Symptoms** are how the tree expresses the disease or insect invasion. Common symptoms include discoloration of foliage (“red phase”), loss of foliage, branch dieback, excessive resin flow, pitch tubes, or pitch streaming on the bole.

**Signs** are expressions of the agent itself, such as a fungal fruiting body on a needle, a conk on the tree bole, bark beetle gallery patterns, or chewed and webbed needles.

**Patterns** of damage on trees will provide clues. Note the portion of the trees affected, such as the branches or bole, (top, bottom, or whole tree). Is a certain tree species or particular age class affected? Did groups of trees die within a short period of time? Or has mortality progressed slowly over many years?

**Context** describes factors such as geographical location, weather patterns, and information on past activities on the site. Topographic location (elevation, aspect, slope), site history (drought, wildfire, management activities), timing (foliar discoloration in fall vs. spring), and forest characteristics (pure or mixed species, stand density).

*Source: Goheen, 2021. Field Guide to Common Diseases and Insect Pests of Oregon and Washington.*

# Forestry Newsletter

## **'STUMP' YOUR FORESTER:**

### **"HOW DO I KEEP MY PRIVACY WHEN THINNING TO PREVENT WILDFIRE AND DISEASE?"**



Most people move to the forest to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life, and no one really wants to make eye-contact with the neighbors while drinking coffee on the porch. But, alas, those pesky trees have grown too close to your home and too close to each other, and now you are at risk of losing your ENTIRE forest in one catastrophic wildfire. It may seem like thinning your trees is counter-productive to keeping your privacy, but it can actually increase your privacy while protecting your property.

If you look out at your forest stand, and all the trees are void of branches - are you really getting much privacy out of the 8" trunks of those trees? Probably not. What really gives you privacy in your forest is the **UNDERSTORY** vegetation. "Enclosed" forest stands happen when the trees grow too close and their crowns become "connected." These stands are often dark, with very little grass, forbs, or bushes growing on the ground. When stands become enclosed, disease and wildfire risks go WAY up, and the lack of light in the understory restricts any other plants from growing. Pretty soon the trees that provided privacy when they were young are all grown up, and all you get is the trunk to block the view.

Thinning your forest will remove the stressed, sick, and dying trees, and will open the overstory to let the sunshine in to the understory. When the bushes, grasses, and forbs start growing, they will provide excellent year-round privacy for your home while attracting more wildlife to your stand. Creating a "mosaic" arrangement in your forest will help your stand be more resilient to wildfires and pest outbreaks. If you don't have bushes on site, consider checking out our Asotin County Conservation District Tree Sale for native plants that enhance your forest.

Your Friendly Forester,  
*Lacy Ausman-Ditto*

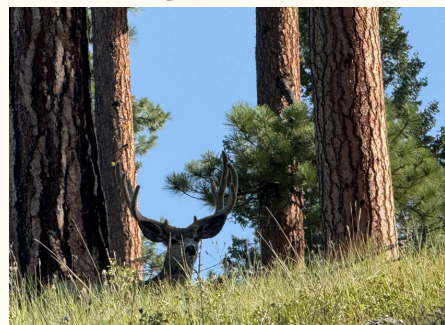
Below Photo: A dark forest stand with enclosed overstory, restricting all understory vegetation.



Below Photo: A "mosaic arrangement" forest with multiple age classes, and a thriving understory.



Below Photo: Mule deer using understory vegetation for cover.



## **THINK YOU CAN 'STUMP' YOUR FORESTER?**

Shoot me an email and let's see if I can figure it out!

[lacy@asotincd.org](mailto:lacy@asotincd.org)



### **Looking for more forestry information?**

Contact Lacy Ausman-Ditto today to schedule a free site visit and forest evaluation:

[lacy@asotincd.org](mailto:lacy@asotincd.org) (509) 552-8120



## **IMPORTANT UPCOMING DATES:**

**ACCD Board Meeting: December 11<sup>th</sup> at 12pm**

**ACCD Board Meeting: January 8<sup>th</sup> at 12pm**

### **ACCD Office Closures:**

DECEMBER 24-25TH, CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY

JANUARY 1<sup>ST</sup>, NEW YEARS DAY

### **Fun Fact:**

The first steam saw-mill in Asotin County was opened by A. Leland and L.M. Starr in 1863 in an unknown location "on the west side of the Snake River, 16-miles above Lewiston, in the midst of an extensive area of timbered land." The mill supplied a significant amount of lumber needed to build the cities of Asotin, Clarkston, and Lewiston.

Source: *The Lewiston Tribune, September 26, 1990*