

Executive Summary

2021 Region 5 Fire Report

Wilderness Dozerlines and the Mounting Impact of Fire Suppression in Wildland Landscapes 2016-2021



Nearly every ridgeline in the proposed Pattison Wilderness Area was bulldozed by fire suppression crews during the 2021 Monument Fire. Photo credit: Kent Collard

Lands either proposed or officially designated as Wilderness Areas are often the most remote, inaccessible and unindustrialized environments remaining on the landscape. Important from both a biological and social perspective, they support high levels of biodiversity, clean water, important fisheries, excellent wildlife habitat, intact plant communities, solitude, unparalleled scenic qualities and unique recreational opportunities. Wilderness Areas are designated by Congress to preserve natural ecological conditions and an enduring wilderness resource for present and future generations.

Wilderness fire suppression and the associated impacts have quickly become one of the most pervasive threats to the preservation of wilderness on our public lands in the West. Preserving wilderness as a public resource requires a level of humility and a responsibility to future generations that is increasingly uncommon during wildfire events.

Unfortunately, in recent years, forest and fire managers have been negligent, and even openly non-compliant with their responsibilities under the Wilderness Act. During this time, fire suppression impacts in designated Wilderness Areas, National Monuments, Inventoried Roadless Areas, Botanical Areas, and other conservation management areas have dramatically increased. Wilderness bulldozing, heavy handed snagging, and other damaging forms of industrialized fire suppression have become increasingly common in protected areas and designated wilderness areas in southwestern Oregon and throughout California. Since 2016, fire managers have repeatedly bulldozed into protected Wilderness Areas and other wildlands

throughout the region. In most of these circumstances, wilderness or wildland dozerline construction was not only damaging to the environment, but it was also operationally ineffective and failed to contribute to fire containment.

Despite their widespread futility, wilderness dozerlines have left lasting impacts on some of our most cherished landscapes. Recent wilderness bulldozing (2016-2021) has been documented to leave lasting impacts to wilderness character, rare plant species, Native American archeological sites, old-growth forests, mountain meadows, intact plant communities, streams, scenic values, wilderness hiking trails, and the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. If allowed to continue, these impacts could threaten the preservation of “an enduring wilderness resource,” degrade the wilderness environment for future generations, and significantly impact important cultural and biological values on federal lands.



Dozerline built over the Pacific Crest Trail in the Bucks Lake Wilderness Area during the 2021 Dixie Fire. Photo Credit: Darrel Jury

During the 2021 fire season, land managers in northern California created extensive, often ineffective or unnecessary dozerlines in the Trinity Alps Wilderness, the Mt. Shasta Wilderness, and the proposed Pattison Wilderness on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest, as well as the Bucks Lake Wilderness in the Plumas National Forest. The *2021 Region 5 Fire Report* uses four fires that burned in northern California during the 2021 fire season as case studies, exploring the impacts of industrialized wilderness fire suppression activities implemented during suppression of the Lava Fire near Mt. Shasta, the Monument Fire on the

Trinity River, the Dixie Fire in the Northern Sierra Nevada and Southern Cascade Mountains and the River Complex Fire in the Scott, Salmon and Trinity River watersheds.

For example, during the 2021 Monument Fire on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest fire crews bulldozed across numerous ridges in the proposed Pattison Wilderness Area and in the designated Trinity Alps Wilderness Area, damaging recreational trails, scenic values, biological values and sites sacred to local Native American tribes. Residents in Trinity County who are very familiar with wildfires were shocked by the damaging fire suppression tactics they were seeing implemented during the Monument Fire and reached out to elected officials with their concerns. In response, the Secretary of Agriculture, Tom Vilsak, specifically requested that fire suppression impacts be limited in the proposed Pattison Wilderness and in the Trinity Alps Wilderness. Unfortunately, direction from the Secretary of Agriculture was ignored by fire managers and wilderness bulldozing both continued and intensified during the remainder of the fire period.

Over 11 miles of dozerline was also built in the Bucks Lake Wilderness on the Plumas National Forest during the 2021 Dixie Fire, including 5.6 miles built directly on top of or adjacent to the

Pacific Crest Trail. The Bucks Lake Wilderness is the only designated Wilderness Area in the Plumas National Forest, and now nearly every accessible trail leading into this beautiful region has been churned into a dusty, disturbed dozer track.

Additional impacts were sustained in the Mt. Shasta Wilderness where fire crews built dozerlines high on the mountain into the subalpine and alpine zone, while the Lava Fire naturally self-extinguished in the deep, rocky chasm of Diller Canyon on the mountain's western face. This left wilderness dozerline creation completely unnecessary and unutilized for fire containment.



The Boulder Lake Trail leading into the Trinity Alps Wilderness was bulldozed by fire crews during suppression of the River Complex Fire. Photo credit: Amanda Barragar

Fire crews also bulldozed and otherwise impacted the Trinity Alps Wilderness in both the Monument Fire in the Trinity River canyon and in numerous locations above Scott Valley and Trinity Lake in the River Complex Fire. This has badly damaged numerous wilderness hiking trails, including the Pacific Crest Trail, the Backbone Trail, Swift Creek Trail, Boulder Lake Trail, and the Mill Creek Trail.

Klamath Forest Alliance, and many of our partners across the West, believe that fire suppression impacts can and should be dramatically reduced in our wildland habitats, while also providing for public safety and effectively suppressing or managing wildland fires. Yet, we believe that change will only come when the current impacts are exposed and Forest Service land managers are made to answer for the increasing destruction of our natural and cultural heritage during wildfire events.

Our 2021 Region 5 Fire Report documents the increasing impact of industrialized fire suppression activities in our most important federal lands. We also recommend that the Region 5 Forest Service recommit to the protection of wildland habitats, biodiversity and cultural resources during fire management operations by more effectively implementing current protocols for resource protection. This should include:

- 1) A commitment to implement Minimum Impact Suppression Tactics (MIST) whenever possible in sensitive environments, including Wilderness Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas, Botanical Areas, designated Backcountry Areas, Research Natural Areas and other conservation areas intended to protect habitat values, biodiversity or natural conditions.

- 2) The development of fire management plans in the upcoming National Forest plan revisions. These plans should identify specific MIST strategies and tactics appropriate in sensitive environments and land use designations.
- 3) The utilization of managed wildfire for resource benefit in Wilderness Areas, Inventoried Roadless Area and other backcountry habitats, while at the same time protecting communities, infrastructure and habitat values.
- 4) Increased consultation between local resources knowledgeable about a specific region, Resource Advisors (READS), and Incident Command Teams.
- 5) An annual after-action review and investigation conducted at a Regional scale, addressing all wilderness dozerlines and “non-compliant” activities approved during each fire season. These reviews should make recommendations to limit future impacts through adaptive management and effective regulation of fire suppression activities in Wilderness Areas, Inventoried Roadless Areas and other sensitive habitats.
- 6) After-action reviews should include tribes, members of the public, environmental organizations, Regional Forest Service officials, local National Forest officials and fire managers. Reviews and their findings should be made public with an annual report tracking fire suppression impacts in sensitive environments and land use allocations.

The full report can be found at the following link:

<https://klamathsiskiyoufirereports.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/2021-region-5-fire-report-3.pdf>

For more information on fire suppression impacts and to view previous fire reports:

<https://klamathsiskiyoufirereports.org/>

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