

The impossible becomes possible: We can fix our forest health issues

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Publisher, Wenatchee World

Aug. 1, 2017

It is absolutely stunning how much momentum has been built in the last few years to reduce wildfire risks and improve forest health in North Central Washington and across the state.

We had a chance to review progress at a Forest Health Summit Monday night at the Wenatchee Valley Museum & Cultural Center with a panel headlined by Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz and Sen. Brad Hawkins. Other members represented local government, the forest products industry, conservation groups, the North Central Forest Health Collaborative and the Forest Service.

It was refreshing to speak to and listen to Commissioner Franz, who has made wildfire protection and forest health two critical initiatives of the Department of Natural Resources. I can see why she gets rave reviews from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. She's a straight shooter and someone who drives to the heart of the issue.

North Central Washington, not surprisingly, is leading the charge for developing creative ways to improve the environment, better coordinate firefighting efforts, build the economy and strengthen communities.

It was the museum, under interim director Jim Russell, that launched the Wildfire exhibit and subsequent Wildfire Summit a few years ago. That effort built on the groundbreaking work of photographer John Marshall and forest researcher Dr. Paul Hessburg, as well as the forest collaborative.

But it seems to me that the real game changer in shifting the conversation was the development of the Era of Megafires presentation, which married the work of Hessburg and Marshall with the storytelling prowess of North 40 Productions.

Hessburg has made more than 70 presentations to in excess of 10,000 people from lawmakers in Olympia to community groups all over the Northwest. The presentation shows the dangerous conditions of our forest and the practices and decisions that were well meaning at the time but ultimately resulted in our current "epidemic of trees" that our communities and quality of life at serious risk.

Bringing people together in dialogue to understand these issues has created a powerful network of people who see the problems and know how we can fix them.

Wildfires are, after all, community challenges, and everyone can and must play a part if we are to solve the issue. Homeowners and neighbors can harden their homes from fire, cities and counties can adopt smarter regulations about where people can build, and the 2.7 million acres of unhealthy forest must be managed through aggressive prescribed burns and commercial thinning. When there are fires, the agencies need to better coordinate.

The Era of Megafires presentation calls out all of these solutions and more. These presentations have started conversations in communities about what is possible if we work together and everyone plays a part.

Sen. Hawkins and Rep. Joel Kretz both sponsored legislation this year that sets us on the path of addressing the need to improve forest health across the large landscapes over the next 20 years. Their leadership was pivotal and the bills passed unanimously.

More needs to be done. We need to do more prescribed burning and get past the objections of some nuisance smoke in favor of being safer from catastrophic wildfire down the road.

We are living at a place and in a moment of time where what might seem impossible (restoring forest health) is becoming possible. With the leadership at DNR and with Sen. Hawkins and Kretz, and the efforts of the FireWise neighborhood associations, plus the collaboration of firefighting agencies and the potential development of a robust forest products industry here, we will one day prove to the country how great civic leaders and great communities roll up their shirtsleeves and get things done.