

## All of Oregon at risk in 2019

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*By Greg Stiles*

Forestry issues are no longer confined to rural Oregon — it's now a statewide issue, forestry consultant Matthew Donegan told a gathering of state business, agency and elected leaders Monday.

The formation of an Oregon forest business plan now ranks among the state's highest priorities, Donegan said.

Among the plethora of financial issues addressed during Monday's 16th Oregon Leadership Summit, the forests which cover more than half of the state were given their due.

While the term "forest business plan" doesn't resonate with trained foresters, who work in the woods, it does suggest discipline, reality, making tough choices and hard decisions, and it demands action, he said.

"That's exactly what is needed in Oregon's forests," said Donegan, who led Forest Capital Management for 15 years and was recruited by former Gov. Ted Kulongoski to evaluate the state's federal forests.

The urgency was brought on by recent Western wildfires — from the Eagle Creek fire that jumped the Columbia River last year to the Camp fire that destroyed Paradise, California, in November.

"Even as you grieve that community, you have to sober up and ask yourself: Can that happen here?" Donegan said. "The truth of the matter is that it nearly did. Troutdale, not far from here, was under threat from the Eagle Creek fire."

The fire burned 13 miles of territory in 16 hours before a wind shift redirected the threat.

Beyond the flames, bad air quality creates an array of health issues.

"In the past year, Southern Oregon experienced the worst air quality in the country during July," he said. "Portland had the second (worst) air quality in the world in August. As a dad who took his kids out biking without checking the air quality index, we endured coughing and choking for the next six weeks after that."

Bend also endured numerous hazardous air warnings during the summer.

He pointed to a map of the state that shows the catastrophic risk assessment. The bright red areas showing the highest risk followed the Interstate 5 corridor and spread into Central and Eastern Oregon.

"I'm drawing your attention not to just the extent of the red, but where it's located," Donegan said. "Look at how covered up Medford is, this explains why the (Oregon) Shakespeare Festival was closed down for 26 (performances) this last summer."

Donegan showed how the red patches moved up to Bend, showing a similar risk, and on up to Hood River. More subtly, he said, orange swaths covered many other metropolitan areas, including Clackamas and Lane counties.

“That map doesn’t even consider climate change,” he said.

Both the United Nations and federal government have put out reports saying climate change is far worse than thought and there will be a direct relationship with fire. Donegan said looking over the past 30 years, state researchers have attributed 50 percent of Oregon wildfires to climate change.

“When you look ahead at the amount of fuel (in the forests), the impacts of climate change, and the population growth, it is a very serious issue,” he said. “It’s a statewide issue that threatens human life, human health, and our water supplies.”

Beyond property loss, during 2017 there was a \$51 million loss in tourism.

“It’s an economic development issue and it obviously affects our public finance,” he said.

There is a social justice element as well, he said.

The most vulnerable populations who may not have insulation or air conditioning are more likely to inhale smoke.

“After smoke exposure they’re the folks least likely to have access to quality health care to deal with the effects,” he said.

During a later breakout session, Donegan said it is important to develop ownership for a plan.

“Somebody has to wake up every morning, owning this,” he said. “What I’ve discovered along the way is that this hasn’t been clear. We get great reports — old and new — with the same themes. We can see a paper trail of progress, but the issue of scale reflects a governance problem.”

There hasn’t been an integrated plan, he said. Federal agencies have invited Oregon and other states to provide input.

“To me this is an opportunity to do things differently,” Donegan said. “It’s a matter of getting organized and see what is our priorities and sequencing. It has to cross all geographies.”

While there are 26 small-scale projects that have addressed the issue with thinning and other ways of mitigating fuel, a much greater effort is needed to move the needle.

“We need to put it all together in an actionable business plan,” Donegan said. “Frankly, it’s got to come from outside the forestry sector; it’s above our pay grade.”

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