

September 21, 2000

To: Lafayette's Citizens' Watershed Board

Re: slash burning

Dear Board Members:

I am concerned about the upcoming burning of the slash piles which remain after the clearcutting in the watershed. I see no need for it to happen at this point. I feel there will be damage to other potential use options in the watershed if it is allowed. It is bound to create a few smoky, irritating days; significant nutrients will be lost; and I personally have a moral issue with taking the homes and lives of God's creatures unnecessarily. Slash piles provide animal shelter and contribute valuable material for the reestablishment of the forest which was cut.

McMinnville High School had a forestry program within their agriculture program when I attended some 25 years ago. We debated issues and practices as an exercise: clearcutting vs. selective cutting, family farms vs. corporate agribusiness, etc. Also whether to burn slash to make room for additional planting--the traditional method--or whether to pile it for wildlife habitat and nutrient benefits for the future. It was clear to me then which was proper--to minimize the damage; take what you need and leave the rest; give some of the creatures something they can come back to and restart the forest.

Unless and until consensus by the Board has been reached on two issues--that commercial forestry production is in the future of the watershed, and that the method used will be to pursue maximum revenue through traditional practices--then it would be unwise to allow the destruction of this resource which is valuable to many uses.

The slash piles are, or can be, consistent with and/or enhance the following uses, all of which are allowed (this list is not meant to be inclusive):

wildlife habitat

any use with which wildlife habitat is consistent (utility, watershed)

recreation (hiking, jogging, biking, riding, wildlife watching, picnicking, etc.)

forestry (with practices that allow slash piles to remain, of course)

forest products (boughs, whips, mushrooms, cones, firewood, berries, native plants, etc.)

education (interpretive trails, field trips, meetings)

agriculture

Downed woody debris, typically caused by fallen limbs and trees, is so integral to a forest that a certain volume per acre is used to classify forest types, in particular, old growth forests.

Downed woody debris holds, absorbs, and acts as a reservoir for water thus mitigating runoff and providing sustenance for the forest. It is one of the mechanisms by which the large trees of a forest survive in the absence of surface water. The debris stores nutrients for slow release into the forest system.

Following a clearcut there is a loss of nutrients from the area, as well as a loss of ability to replace those nutrients for some time. Nutrient loss can be cut significantly if slash remains on the site.

A young forest produces downed woody debris at the smallest rate in relation to forests of increased age. Leaving the slash piles would give this project a head start--a start that will begin to turn this from a tree farm into a forest again at a faster rate than it would without it. Faster because slash piles/downed woody debris attract insects and wildlife in need of food and shelter which in turn enrich the area with bodily decay, droppings, and seeds by their own methods of dispersion. Additionally, microscopic plants and animals are able to contribute their mechanisms to the transformation, retention, and release of nutrients back to the forest--a vital component of the cycle of a forest.

There is diversity of plant species in those piles already--diversity which will be lost if they are burned. If eradicated, it could be many years before the diversity already represented in the piles is achieved in terms of nutrients and micro-organisms present. The variety of decaying plant types currently represented in the slash attract more and varied creatures. Left to simply the newly planted Douglas fir, it could be decades before significant downed woody debris accumulates and perhaps a hundred years.

On my brief walk through the watershed two weeks ago I found birds busily poking about in the piles. I'm sure a biologist would find much more activity on which to comment.

The following quotes are taken from:

Analysis of Coniferous Forest Ecosystems in the Western United States Edited by Robert L. Edmonds, University of Washington

Chapter: "Nutrient Cycling in Forests of the Pacific Northwest: Effects of Site Disturbance on Nutrient Cycling and its Management Implications: Effect of Harvesting in the Nutrient Capital of an Ecosystem, Effects of Harvesting on Soil Leaching, Effects of Fire"

"The most obvious immediate effect of clearcutting on nutrient distribution is the removal of part of one of the nutrient pools, that is, the trees. Assuming that all of the foliage is left on a site, clearcutting results in the removal of only a small percentage of the nutrient capital of a site, providing the site isn't burned."* (Emphasis added.)

"It can be concluded that net loss [of nutrients] from the system due to harvesting is...highly dependent on degree of utilization of the trees." (Meaning, the more the tree is utilized commercially, the greater the loss of nutrients from the forest system; the less it is utilized, the less the nutrient loss as long as those unused components remain on site.)

"The input of foliage and branches to the forest floor compartment dramatically increases the carbon and nutrient content of that compartment."

"Fire is an important agent in natural ecosystems and it results in considerably more nitrogen loss from an ecosystem than clearcutting alone. The practice of using fire as a management tool for slash burning needs to be closely examined in relation to its impact on nitrogen losses and tree productivity."

Please use your influence to make a recommendation to the City Council that the slash burning be ceased, or at least, that it be postponed a year until such time as a consensus has been reached by the Board that forestry has been deemed the compatible use in the watershed and that slash burning is a desired part of the management plan.

Perhaps making the decision easier is that, when I walked through the watershed two weeks ago, I found the piles poorly covered, or not at all, and getting wet. The piles are small (15'x15' average), many, and dispersed, which is better for overall distribution of the nutrient benefits which these piles currently and would continue to provide. The number and dispersion of piles also contributes to erosion control.

It would be premature and unwise to allow the destruction of this resource in light of its value as mentioned above and its value to several possible potential uses in the watershed, especially when the only reason for its destruction has not yet been deemed the appropriate response for the watershed.

I know you've heard me ask before, but I respectfully ask again: When will all these current, interim forestry issues be out of the way so that the board will be able to consider future options? And by then, will there have been too many things done to allow consideration of any other possibilities? Tree planting, slash burning, more tree planting, brush control... We already have Board members saying that we need to consider these issues because the City has made an investment of trees up there. But in actuality, the newly planted trees need not be considered a loss in non-forestry issues. They are a benefit in as many uses as are the slash piles.

How much more committed will this Board be to considering forestry as the only possible use if the slash burning is allowed to proceed? Is it possible to put the watershed in a holding pattern for a year so that the Board can do its work without undue pressure?

The existing trees are worthy of your consideration; however, they need not impede other avenues of use, neither should their existence dictate use. Similarly for slash--its existence should not eliminate uses; its absence should not dictate use.

Thank you for your consideration,

Carol Paddock

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