

CONSERVATION CORNER

Forest Health: Fuels and Fuels Treatments

The last Conservation Corner articles delved into topics related to forest health, specifically wildfires and what is at stake when a wildfire occurs. The focus of this article explains the concept of fuels and the significance of fuel treatments.

Fuel is the combustible biomass found in forests. Fuels include everything from needles, grasses, small twigs, shrubs, branches on the ground, downed trees, logs, and tree canopies. They can be either living or dead and can be arranged vertically and horizontally. Homes and other structures are also considered forms of fuel.

Too much wood in the woods increases the likelihood of a fire when dry vegetation, hot conditions, and an ignition source are present. So, forests must be proactively managed to provide ecological stability and promote forest health.

Forest management involves fuels treatments that aim to reduce and rearrange the amount and continuity of fuel within a forest stand and the surrounding landscape. These treatments include thinning, prescribed burning, pruning, and mechanical understory treatments such as mastication or mowing. Empirical studies demonstrate that when designed at a landscape scale, a combination of these treatments can work together to reduce the risk of wildfire occurrence and change the way they spread through an area as well as its severity, ultimately minimizing their potential negative impact.

Additionally, these treatments can lead to positive outcomes such as improved wildlife habitat, increase biodiversity, and enhanced forage production. In fact, many ecosystems rely on periodic fires to clear out dead organic material, and some plant and animal populations require the benefits that fire brings to survive and reproduce. For instance, the wild lupine is one such organism that needs fire to maintain an ecosystem balance that allows it to thrive.

Please continue to follow the Conservation Corner Forest Health series for informative articles on the actions being taken in congress to support efforts at the state level and in our local federal forests. The series will also include what you can do around your own property to minimize the risks of wildfire.

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