Fire, Thinning, and the Wildlands/Urban Interface in the Pollalie-Cooper Timber Sales

The Pollalie Cooper Logging Project is divided into three sales: Clan, Kilt, and Tartan.   Clan and Kilt are West of Highway 35 and surround the Cooper Spur Ski Area. Tartan is East of Highway 35.

Clan and Kilt together propose 445 acres of logging. The Forest Service's stated goal of reducing the risk of fire in the Wildlands/Urban Interface encompasses only 94 acres of this logging (just 21% of the sales). The Forest Service justifies the rest of the Clan and Kilt sales through visual improvement and forest health.

Wildlands/Urban Interface Management for fire risk control is in many ways still a new and controversial subject. There are many unanswered questions and many untested solutions. In the Pollalie-Cooper Sales, extensive thinning is the proposed action to address the concerns. Despite its apparent popularity as a solution, there is very little scientific evidence that thinning actually reduces the risk of fire in the Wildlands/Urban Interface. The reality is much more complex. Thinning opens the forest canopy which "may exacerbate some fire risks by encouraging the growth of grass and exposing the forest to the drying effects of sun and wind"[1] Excessively thinned forests also provide less resistance to wind, increasing wind speeds, which increases fire risk[2]. Large Douglas Fir trees and Ponderosa Pines are naturally fire resistant.[3] It is to our advantage to leave these trees if we wish to decrease the risk of stand-replacing crown fires.

Thinning for fire risk reduction is often controversial in the environmental community because fire is often used as an excuse to log forests at the expense of ecological integrity while actually increasing the risk of fire for the Wildlands/Urban Interface.   The question to ask of the Wildlands/Urban Interface logging in the Pollalie-Cooper sales is to determine whether the type of logging proposed in the particular sites designated by the sales would reduce the risk of severe wildfire and improve the ecological integrity of the area, or whether the logging would actually increase the risk of severe wildfire, while degrading the ecological integrity at the area. Is the restoration and fire management here valid or is it a political excuse to log trees of commercial value and prepare the area for ski expansion development? Type of Logging: Age, Size, Species, and amount of trees cut. Site Question: Forest Types, extent of fire suppression, natural fire regimes. [Format this in box in the middle of this paragraph]

Bark is currently in the process of visiting the areas proposed for logging in the Wildlands/Urban Interface. We need your help ground-truthing these areas.   In the Wildlands Urban Interface, we specifically need to know where the big trees are, how big they are, what species they are, and if they are labeled to cut or to save.   We also are looking for the density of the forest and for fuel ladders (do the smaller trees lean up against medium trees, lean up near the crown's of the oldest trees increasing the risk for crown-fires?)   What is the fuel load on the forest floor?

Our preliminary examinations of the area have found:
- Fairly open stands of diverse moist forest recovering from partial stand replacement fires in the late 1800s, with some older doug firs marked to be cut (despite their fire resistant qualities)
- Mature diverse forests dominated by grand-firs naturally recovered from a more intense stand replacement fire. These areas appear largely open   Areas of old Ponderosa Pines marked to cut have been found.
- Groves of fairly dense mature lodgepole pole.   Lodgepole Pine is part of the natural ecological succession following stand replacement fires. These areas have not yet recovered to the stage of the other two types of forest we witnessed.   We were particularly troubled by the tree species other than lodgepole pine marked to be cut directly adjacent to the lodgepole pine areas.

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[1] Page 18 of booklet
[2] Page 19 of booklet
[3] I am sure this is documented somewhere