Engaged Perspectives on Thinning and Prescribed Fire Effectiveness in Westside Oregon Forests: 2025 Survey Results

ECOSYSTEM WORKFORCE PROGRAM | Fact Sheet 37 **OCTOBER 2025**

The Ecosystem Workforce Program (EWP) partnered with the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative and the Oregon Department of Forestry's Federal Forest Restoration Program to administer an online survey aimed at better understanding perspectives about the use of silvicultural interventions, such as thinning and prescribed fire, for managing fire in productive westside Oregon forests.

We sent the online survey to approximately 450 people including forest and watershed councils, stewardship groups, collaboratives, and conservation groups. The survey was specifically focused on collecting input from U.S. Forest Service managers, collaborative groups, and engaged citizens with an interest in fire management silviculture in productive western Oregon forests.

Types of respondents and forests they work in or utilize

EWP received 55 complete responses[1] to the survey (Figure 1). Respondents indicated that they worked in or utilized the following forests (Figure 2). Most respondents selected more than one forest.

Figure 1. Number and type of respondents

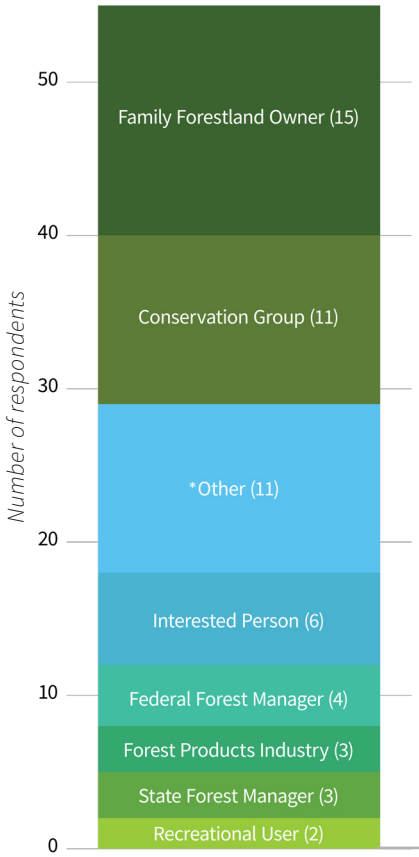
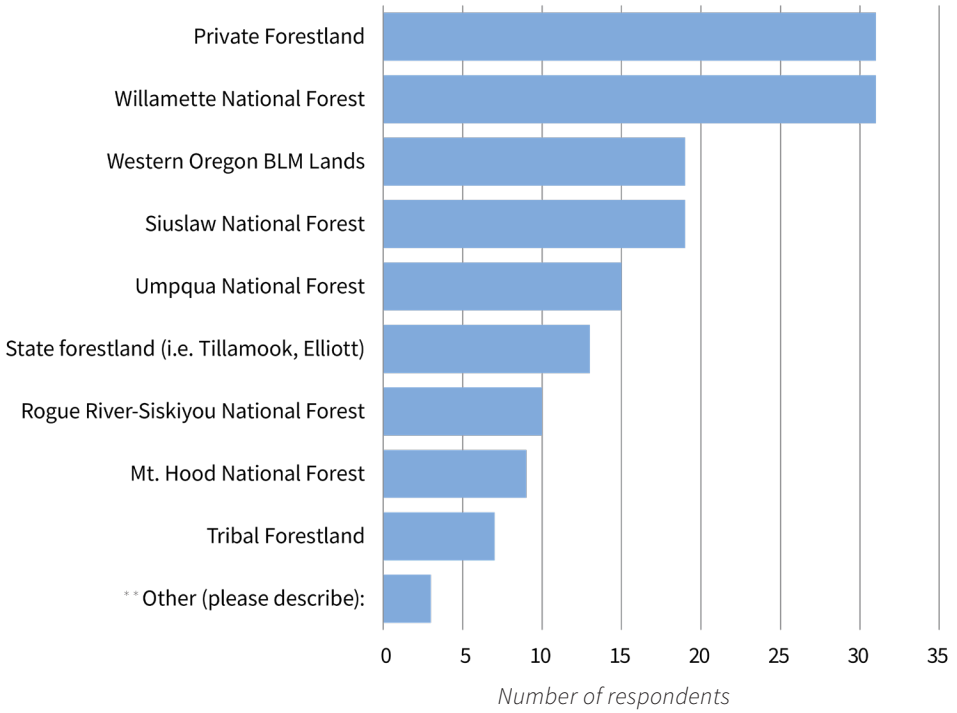


Figure 2. Westside Oregon forests that respondents indicated they work in or utilize



*Other includes: local government, municipal forest manager, retired forest manager, former firefighter, forest dweller, curent firefighter (2), wildland firefighter, fire district chief, utility, and collaborative forest member

**Other includes: county and city forests, national parks, and industrial forestland

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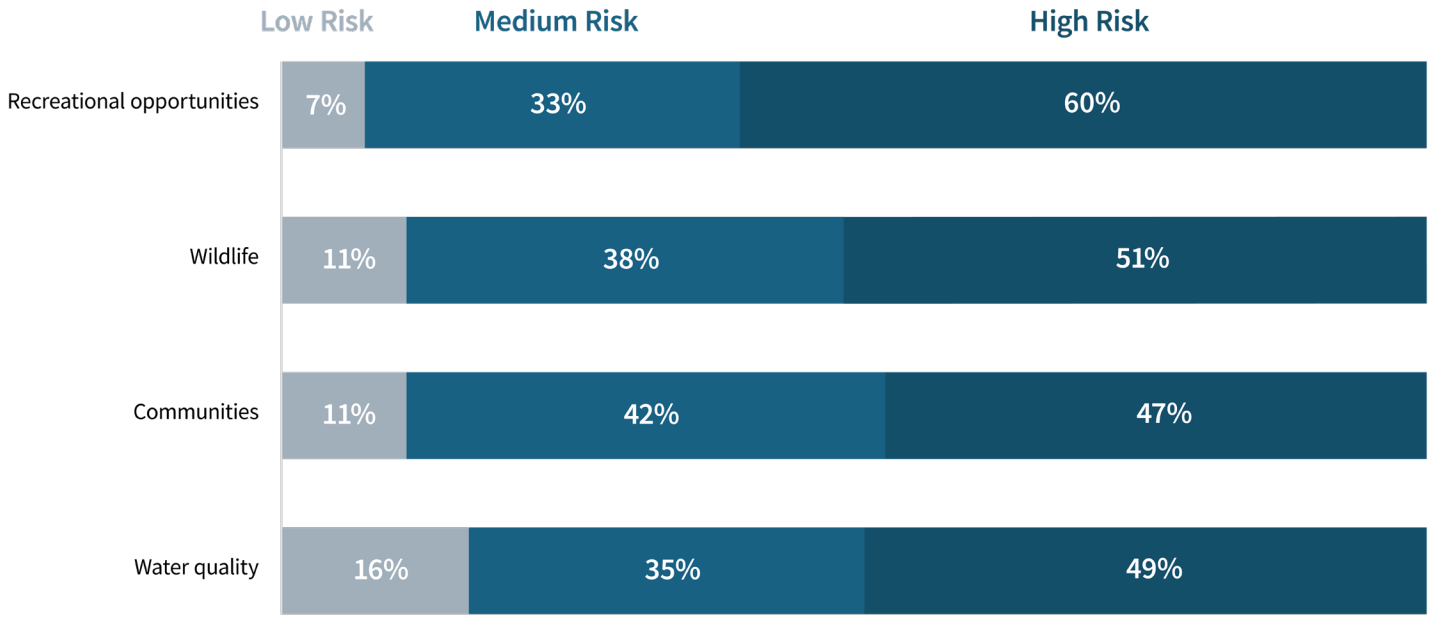
Assessment of wildfire risk to resources

When asked to evaluate the risk of wildfire to communities, wildlife, water quality, and recreational opportunities with 1-3 indicating “low risk”, 4-7 indicating “medium risk” and 8-10 indicating "high risk", most respondents selected "high risk" for all categories (Figure 3). Zero respondents selected "0" or "no risk". However, respondents perceived a slightly lower risk to communities and water quality (median= 7, “high risk”) than for wildlife and recreation (median= 8, “high risk”). With some exceptions, respondents who indicated lower risk values generally did so across the board for all categories. The same was generally true for the opposite end of the spectrum. For example, respondents rarely ranked one category (i.e. water quality) very low risk, and another category (i.e. wildlife) very high risk.

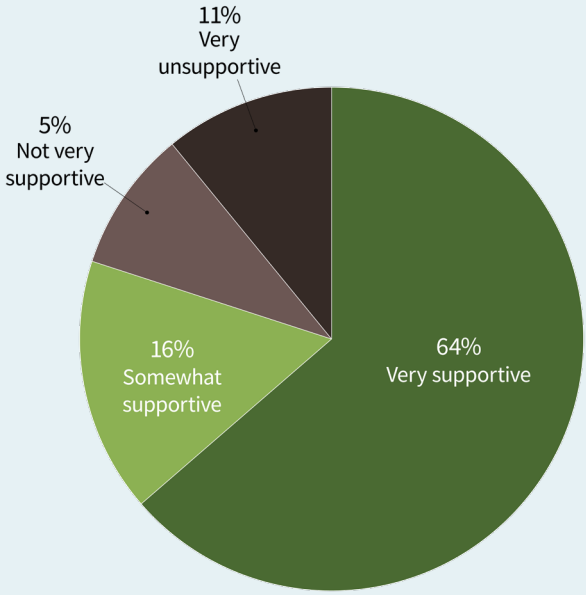
Figure 3. Rankings of wildfire risk to communities, wildlife, water quality, and recreational opportunities (percent of respondents)



Perspectives on thinning

When asked: "How would you describe your level of support for thinning to reduce fire risk to important resources on moist, productive western Oregon forestlands?", 80 percent of respondents were very supportive or somewhat supportive of thinning to reduce wildfire risk (Figure 4).

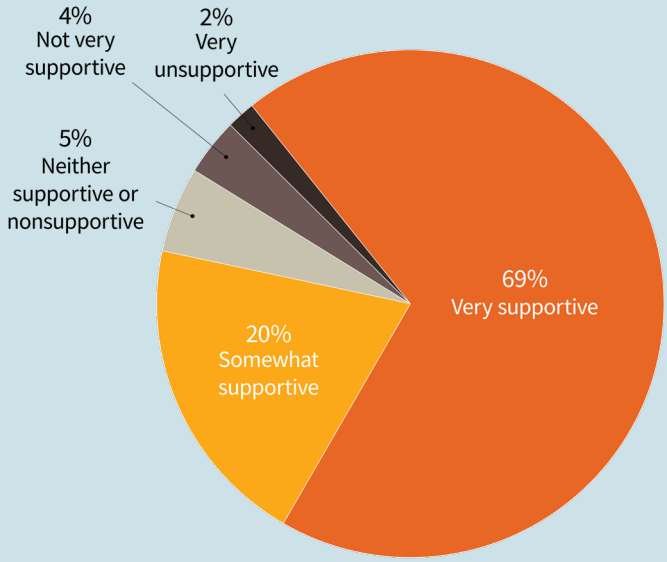
Figure 4. Level of support for thinning to reduce wildfire risk



Perspectives on prescribed fire

When asked: "How would you describe your level of support for prescribed fire to reduce fire risk to important resources on moist, productive western Oregon forestlands?" 89 percent of respondents indicated that they were very supportive or somewhat supportive of prescribed fire for reducing wildfire risk (Figure 5).

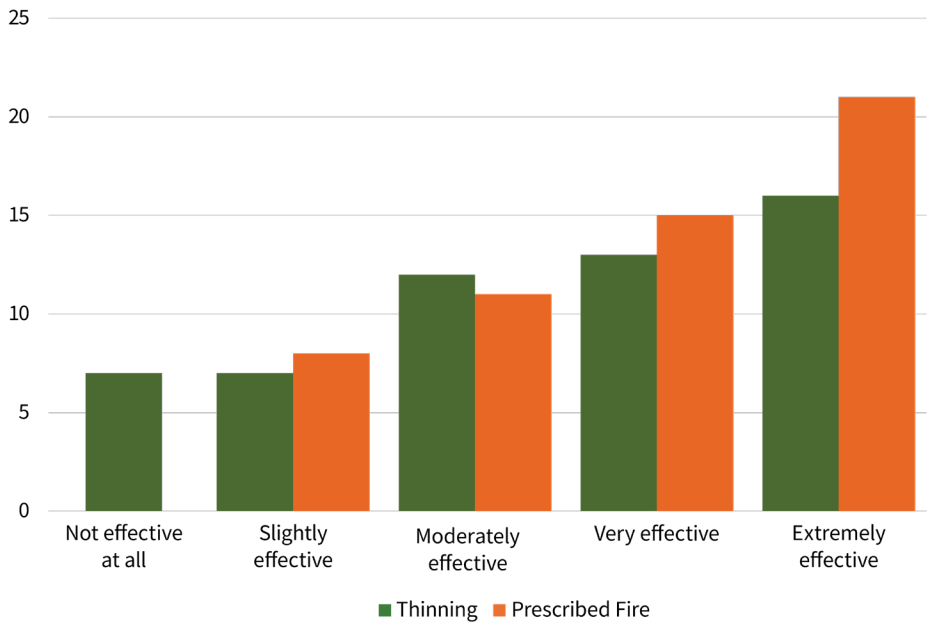
Figure 5. Level of support for prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risk



Thinning and prescribed fire effectiveness

Sixty-five percent of respondents indicated that they believed prescribed fire can be extremely effective or very effective at mitigating fire risk. Fewer respondents (53 percent) believed that thinning can be extremely effective or very effective at mitigating wildfire risk (Figure 6). Those who were very supportive of thinning tended to also be supportive of prescribed fire. Some respondents (n=7) indicated that both thinning and prescribed fire work together to mitigate fire risk, noting that thinning alone does not address the problem of excess fuels and therefore fire risk. This could be one reason why more respondents saw thinning as "not effective at all" or only "slightly effective" when compared to responses for prescribed fire effectiveness.

Figure 6. Respondents' views on thinning and prescribed fire effectiveness for mitigating fire risk in Westside Oregon forests



Key takeaways from open-ended responses

Opportunities and challenges

Write-in comments at the end of the survey reinforced results from the closed-ended survey responses. Many respondents viewed thinning as a useful tool for improving forest health, especially when combined with other silvicultural practices (including prescribed fire and brush thinning or slash management).

Prescribed fire was widely viewed as an effective silvicultural tool, especially for reducing fuel loads after thinning operations. One respondent commented that they believed prescribed fire was the most cost-effective tool for mitigating fire risk.

Five respondents suggested in open-ended responses that they believed thinning without subsequent prescribed burning was not an effective solution for wildfire mitigation. Thinning was not considered an effective silvicultural tool by four respondents; three of these respondents commented that personal experience and peer reviewed literature led them to believe that thinning treatments increased, rather than decreased, fire risk.

Two respondents suggested that fire mitigation investments outside the immediate vicinity of communities and built infrastructure will be ineffective and risk harm to native biodiversity. One respondent indicated that negative public perceptions of logging hinder large-scale thinning projects on public land, while another suggested that legal challenges slow down wildfire mitigation efforts. One respondent also clarified that they ranked prescribed burning as a less effective tool than thinning because burning introduced additional constraints such as availability of personnel, funding, and appropriate weather.

Implications for managers

A small but growing body of research suggests that silvicultural treatments can be effective at helping manage fire in highly productive westside forests (i.e., Busby and Fried 2025[2]). A number of different thinning projects with fire mitigation objectives are currently being planned for western Oregon (see, for instance, the East Oakridge Strategy[3]). Our survey suggests that sufficient common ground currently exists to develop shared learning environments that bring together ecologists, social scientists, managers, and community stakeholders to improve social and ecological strategies for living with fire in western Oregon.

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LAYOUT/DESIGN | Josie Paik

1 Response rate = (64/449*, 14.25%); Completion rate = (55/449*, 12.25%) *estimated
2 Busby, S.U., & Fried, J.S. (2025). Prospects for silvicultural enhancement of fire resistance in mesic westside forests of the Pacific Northwest. Plos One. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0332158.
3 https://www.swfcollaborative.org/eastoakridgestrategy