

Forest Stewardship Workshop

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Local logging contractors and landowners spent three days advancing their knowledge of forest stewardship in Condon last week. A diverse group of participants, all with an interest in the future of forests and forest management in the Swan Valley, gathered to learn more about soils, wildlife, forest productivity, fire and more.

Patrick Heffernan, formerly of the Montana Logging Association, was the facilitator for the workshop. Patrick offered lessons on forest measurements and silviculture and provided insights into new equipment innovations that make forest management more compatible with current economic conditions and ecological concerns. Patrick was also able to provide local contractors with ALP (Associate Learning Professional) credits for their participation in the workshop.

Steve Barrett taught the group about fire history. Much of the workshop was spent interpreting fire regimes in the Swan Valley and discussing how logging does and does not mimic the historic role of fire depending upon the site.

The group started out looking at the non-lethal fire regime as represented on sites near the Gordon Ranch. There the group saw much need for restoration to return those sites to their historic condition. Much of the rest of the time was spent looking at forests in a mixed severity fire regime. This is what covers a majority of the bottomlands in the Swan Valley.

Steve encouraged the group to “think like a fire” when managing these forests, thinning from below in the big larch and fir as well as removing the overstory in patches stimulating new stands of lodgepole pine and other species.

Mark VanderMeer provided a primer on soils. He taught the group how to interpret soil types and site resilience to disturbances such as compaction. Mark also explained the role of fungi in soils and their importance to plant and tree survival and growth. As the group toured the valley, Mark was able to demonstrate where people had unwittingly damaged their soils and as a consequence, had inhibited native plant growth and instead favored weeds. He was also able to share a few techniques for rehabilitating such sites.

Scott Tomson provided information on the needs of wildlife in local forests. He emphasized the importance of snags for wildlife and the critical role of downed woody debris and understory shrubs for many species.

Allen Branine gave an overview of the legal issues related to forest management. He was able to show the group examples of where contractors had successfully complied with the relevant laws. In terms of the hazard reduction laws, he was quick to point out that you can meet the requirements of the law and still leave quite a bit of complexity in the forest.

Participants ranged from multi-generational logging contractors to land owners brand new to the Swan Valley. All seemed to agree that more is needed in the Swan Valley to restore and protect ecological integrity while producing a sustainable flow of wood products long into the future.

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Local landowners and logging contractors attending the three-day workshop.

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