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Ancient fires give clues for foresters

EUGENE (AP) — Researchers have identified and mapped 23 major fires that occurred over the last 500 years in a section of what is now called the Willamette National Forest.

By identifying how wildfires have shaped the forest over the centuries, researchers hope to develop a management plan for the 19,000-acre Augusta Creek drainage east of Eugene.

Under the plan, the U.S. Forest Service may seek to do some logging that approximates the destruction caused in the past by fires.

The project could eventually serve as a model for all federal forest agencies, which are under intense pressure to protect old-growth forests and the wildlife living in them by reducing logging levels and eliminating clear-cutting.

With the Augusta Creek project, "we're coming at it from a different angle altogether," says John Cissel, a U.S. Forest Service researcher who is heading the project. "We're looking at how the ecosystem and its species have evolved according to the natural disturbances over time."

The year-old project is providing data that may help foresters use fire history to determine where and when to cut some timber.

The project also is challenging the notion that current clear-cut logging mimics naturally occurring wildfires.

"Traditionally, we've viewed forest planning as timber volume," says Cissel.

The computer model the Forest Service uses in its traditional planning is "a vehicle for determining how much timber we can harvest."

Traditional forest planning, with its evenly spaced clear-cuts on 80- to 100-year harvest rotations, has failed to perpetuate or approximate natural forest conditions, Cissel said.

Researchers have surveyed 300 plots in the Augusta Creek drainage to get an idea of where, when and how fires burned.