

conservation SHOWCASE

“ Now that we’ve done the thinning, if a fire came through it would kill very few trees. It would stay low to the ground. ”
—Ken Thomas

NRCS

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

Transforming a Forest to Withstand Wildfire

Producer Profile

Name: Ken Thomas

Location: Dufur, Oregon

NRCS Program: Environmental Quality
Incentives Program (EQIP)

If you own forestland in Central Oregon, then you take the threat of wildfire very seriously.

“Just about every few years, we get a wildfire coming through this area,” says Ken Thomas, a woodland owner with 7,200 acres in northern Wasco County. “If we didn’t do something to treat the forest, this whole area would be gone with the fire.”

That’s why Ken is taking proactive steps to

manage his forest to reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire. He’s working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) and the Wasco Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to do pre-commercial thinning, pruning and brush management on a 625-acre tract of his woodlands, which consist mostly of ponderosa pine.

“This has been an incredible team effort,” Ken says. “It’s amazing to have all these partners come together to produce a result that looks like a unified, single effort, but it’s really a community of activity.”

By working with multiple conservation partners, Ken is transforming the property on a landscape scale. NRCS provides Ken with financial payments through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help offset the cost of the thinning. Meanwhile, foresters with ODF give Ken science-based guidance to help him

implement a forest management plan, and the Wasco SWCD provides additional financial and technical support. He even has an easement on the property with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to support wildlife habitat.

Last year, after signing a contract with NRCS, contractors did pre-commercial thinning. This spring, they burned the piles of slash material. And the work doesn't stop there. Ken has more projects planned over the next few years under the NRCS contract.

"Pre-commercial thinning is a recommended conservation practice for reducing wildfire risk, because it removes the excess vegetation that causes a fire to spread higher into the canopy where it burns hotter and causes the most damage," says Garret Duyck, NRCS soil conservationist in Wasco County.

Historically, Ken's property was purchased by the Ward Family in 1870 and was managed to harvest timber for a saw mill they owned in the area. Ken says this tract of land is likely one of the oldest, continuously-managed private timber lands in Oregon.

Ken's father purchased the property in 1958 and continued to manage it for a private timber company. It was clear-cut in 1988 and replanted at 450 trees per acre. Over time, the family thinned the forest down to about 225 trees per acre. But that still wasn't enough to tackle the wildfire threat, especially with the rapid growth of flame-feeding vegetation like manzanita.

"Five years ago, you couldn't walk through here because of all the manzanita bushes," Ken says. "They were more than six feet tall in some areas. It was a fire disaster waiting to happen."

But thanks to the recent thinning project with NRCS, contractors cleared out the manzanita and opened up the understory. His stocking rate is now between 150 to 175 trees per acre.

"Now that we've done the thinning, if a fire came through it would kill very few trees," Ken says. "It would stay low to the ground."

But wildfire resilience isn't the only benefit of pre-commercial thinning; forest health is also a key factor. Ken's trees are now poised to grow taller, stronger and healthier, which is good both for the ecosystem and his bottom line.



After pre-commercial thinning, pruning and brush management, the ponderosa pines on Ken Thomas' property are more resistant to catastrophic wildfire and are better poised to grow taller, stronger and healthier. Pictured: Landowner Ken Thomas (left) and Soil Conservationist Garret Duyck.

“Every time I drive up here, I just smile because everything looks so healthy,” Ken says. “The tree crowns are lush and green, and there’s plenty of open space for them to get sunlight and nutrients.”

“My trees will be a higher-grade saw log 15 years sooner than if we didn’t do the thinning project,” he adds.

Thinning also helps control the spread of the Western pine beetle, an endemic species that can destroy trees in the region.

“The beetles are still there, but the trees aren’t dying from them anymore because we thinned them,” Ken says. “You have to preposition your forest to deal with the beetles.”

Ken plans to have his whole tract thinned by 2019.

“That should position the forest so that the beetle isn’t troublesome,” he says. “If you treat it right, the trees can do more to withstand the beetles and resist it, but it’s all about how you treat it.”

But wait, there’s more. The thinning project has also bolstered habitat for elk, deer and other wildlife on the property.

“I see more deer now than ever before,” Ken says. “They just love the open understory up here.”

“A healthy forest needs to be fully-functioning,” he says. “It’s about growing better trees that will have better value, but in order to do that, you need to have a fully-functioning plant and animal system.”

*Published August 2016 by NRCS Oregon.
Story and photos by Tracy Robillard.*



Deer enjoy the open understory habitat created by pre-commercial thinning on Ken Thomas’ property.

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—Ken Thomas



Reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health on Ken Thomas’ property is a group affair. From left to right: Frank Mattson, contractor; Ryan Bessette, Wasco Soil and Water Conservation District; Mel Gard, Oregon Department of Forestry; David Jacobs, Oregon Department of Forestry; Ken Thomas, landowner; Garret Duyck, Natural Resources Conservation Service; and Bill Richardson, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.