Managing forests to prevent catastrophe

By Katie Campbell and Courtney Flatt, KCTS-TV

WINTHROP, Wash. – Snow blankets the landscape in north central Washington. What you can't see is the scorched earth left from last summer's Carlton Complex fire.

Even through the snow, Susan Prichard, a fire ecologist for the University of Washington, can see the damage. She can also see signs of recovery in the bitterbrush and aspen trees.

Susan Prichard, a fire ecologist for the University of Washington, looks for signs of recovery in the aspen trees.

"Aspen, and cottonwood and willow species are all very fire adapted and disturbance adapted in that they're sprouters," Prichard said. "We've already seen, even in the fall following the Carlton Complex fire, just amazing sprouting by the aspen in particular."

Although these aspen trees are resprouting, the fire this summer damaged other areas far more severely.

The Carlton Complex fire burned more than a quarter million acres – most of it in less than two days, as 30 mile-per-hour winds pushed hot smoke and embers through Okanogan County. Fire swept across shrublands and blazed through forests.

Prichard said it could take half a century or more for this area to recover. But she said there are ways to slow future wildfires.

"We know fire is going to re-occur. These are fire dependent ecosystems," she said. "It's not a question about if fire is going to return, but how it's going to return and how much it's going to burn and how much it's going to allow to

survive.”

Prichard said the best way to help forests in the long run is through thinning and controlled burns.

The question is: How much acreage needs to be treated to make a difference?

Thinning forests reduces the amount of fuel, like small trees, fires have to burn. This could help prevent explosive wildfires.

Reese Lolley, the Eastern Washington forest program director for The Nature Conservancy, said the emphasis on fire suppression in the last century helped create the conditions that have lead to more extreme fires.

Lolley said some fires actually need to burn. Smaller wildfires reduce fire fuel and ultimately create habitat and help regenerate trees.