

J. Edward Schroeder (1914–2010)

By Doug Decker

John Edward Schroeder was Oregon's eighth State Forester, serving from 1965 to 1979. One of his lasting accomplishments was the replanting of the Tillamook Burn, a 500-square-mile area in the Oregon Coast Range that had been devastated by four wildfires between 1933 and 1951.

Schroeder came to the work from a life spent in the woods. Born on April 28, 1914, near the Santiam Canyon town of Gates in the Oregon Cascades, he grew up in logging camps and, like his father and brother, worked as a logger. He put himself through Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University) over thirteen years, earning his forestry degree in 1947. During the early 1930s, Schroeder taught Civilian Conservation Corps recruits how to use saws and to fell trees in the Willamette National Forest. He and his wife Louise were married for seventy-two years and raised two daughters and a son.

In 1941, Schroeder was hired by the Oregon Department of Forestry to administer the newly passed Oregon Conservation Act, which required loggers to plant seed trees during harvest operations. As a forest inspector, he enforced fire regulations and visited logging sites throughout the northern Cascades. He led firefighters working on the 1945 Tillamook fire and was credited with saving a significant stand of old-growth Douglas-fir forest. Following that experience, he remarked casually to State Forester Nels Rogers that if he had his way things would be run differently in northwest Oregon to prevent future wildfires. Rogers remembered that conversation, and he hired Schroeder that fall to be the top Department of Forestry field supervisor for the region and to run the reforestation effort.

Under Schroeder's leadership, the state retooled its organizational structure in northwest Oregon, including the way it worked with forest landowners and prepared for and fought wildfires. Following passage of a statewide constitutional amendment in 1951 that financed reforestation across the 500-square-mile burned area, Schroeder organized and oversaw hand planting of more than 72 million seedlings, leading to the creation of today's Tillamook State Forest.

In 1955, Schroeder was promoted from the field office in the Tillamook Burn to the Department of Forestry's Salem headquarters, where he took on statewide duties. Later, he was appointed by the Oregon Board of Forestry as State Forester, the chief executive officer of the agency responsible for all agency operations and primary forestry advisor for Oregon governors Tom McCall (1967–1975) and Bob Straub (1975–1979). During that time, he oversaw the implementation of the 1971 Oregon Forest Practices Act, which regulates all forest operations on Oregon's privately owned forests.

After retiring from state service in 1979, Schroeder stayed active as a volunteer for public and private organizations in the Salem area, where he lived, including service on the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System board of directors. In his later years, he frequently returned to the former burned-over lands of the Tillamook. In an interview with Forest Grove newspaperman Ellis Lucia, he reflected on the greening of the Tillamook Burn: "It's seldom in a man's lifetime that he can see something like this happen."

Schroeder capped his long career by helping dedicate and cut the ribbon at the April 2006 opening of the Tillamook Forest Center, an educational museum that tells the story of the Tillamook Burn. Schroeder died on January 22, 2010, and is buried in Salem.

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