

Commentary: [National] Forests need more, not less, active management

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Gridlock about the future of the national forests has helped build an accumulation of fuels that has put at least 50 million acres at risk of severe fires, writes Jay O'Laughlin.

In the past fifteen years, key indicators of western national forest conditions have declined. Stands became denser, tree mortality increased substantially, and growth rates slowed. In Idaho, where 39 percent of the state is national forest land, tree mortality is at the highest level reported in 50 years. Accompanied by many decades of fire exclusion and a system-wide 80 percent decrease in national forest timber harvests during the 1990s, current conditions mean accumulated forest fire fuel and increased potential for severe wildfires, especially in drought years. Such fires put ecological, economic, and social values at risk of substantial damage. Although active management can improve national forest conditions, public policies thwart managers from doing what their science-based training, experience and judgment dictate — an ecological restoration strategy that includes long-term fuel reduction goals.

In 2000, widespread wildfires spawned the National Fire Plan. Among its widely agreed-upon implementation goals are reducing hazardous fuels and restoring fire-adapted ecosystems, along with improving fire prevention and suppression, and promoting community assistance. Restoration-based fuel reduction can help ensure long-term progress in reducing wildfire severity. Foresters for at least three decades have been preaching (mostly to themselves) the wisdom of preventative fuel reduction. If restoring low-risk stand conditions and reintroducing low-intensity fire become forest management objectives, future fuel treatments will be needed less often and will be less expensive. To reduce wildfire risk in national forests today, forest density must be reduced by removing some trees. Deciding which trees, where, and when is a management policy problem.

This year's widespread wildfires have drawn attention to a public policy problem — public lands gridlock, or the inability of managers to make or act upon decisions. Gridlock feeds on distrust. Some interest groups argue that the best fire policy option is a taxpayer-supported program to thin small-diameter trees near communities to protect structures, leaving the rest of our national forests alone. Others contend forests everywhere need preventative fuel treatment, and big trees also should be harvested for economic reasons. Both arguments have some grain of truth, but alone neither is totally convincing. Forest conditions vary considerably, and existing science is site-specific. An adaptive management strategy is appropriate, which includes monitoring local forest conditions so managers can learn from their actions and make necessary adjustments. The alternative to active management is many dead trees, reduced productivity, and fuel conditions favoring severe fires and associated habitat and watershed damage.

Fire is an elemental and inescapable force of nature. Fuels have accumulated in national forests to the extent that at least 50 million acres are at risk of severe fires. National forests by law are to provide a variety of values, products and services for American citizens. And indeed they do. A substantial portion of the national forests (35 million acres) is formally designated portions of the National Wilder-

ness Preservation System, where managers can let fires burn as long as adjacent areas are not threatened.

The 191 million acres of national forests provide diverse recreation opportunities and abundant fish and wildlife. The National Forest System is about the same size as the National Park and National Wildlife Refuge Systems combined, but has a different mandate (multiple-use and sustained-yield) and management agency, the Forest Service. On about half the national forest land, timber harvesting has been administratively restricted or tree productivity is nil to very low. The other half is classified as timberland and harvesting is allowed, subject to environmental laws. National forest timberlands contain almost half (46 percent) of the nation's softwood timber inventory, from which comes 6 percent of the nation's timber harvests. Some of the undeveloped "roadless" timberlands are no doubt worthy additions to the Wilderness System, and some perhaps should be developed.

Because we can't seem to agree on how national forest timberlands should be managed, many decisions are made by distant administrators, and worse, by courts — an expensive adversarial approach that breeds distrust and gridlock. Meanwhile trees grow, forests become denser and more susceptible to insects and diseases, and trees die. As hazardous fuels accumulate, the risk of severe fires and associated ecological damage increases.

What can we do about this? The idea of cutting buffers around our cities and towns and allowing catastrophic fires to burn national forests elsewhere denies that these lands are supposed to provide many values worth protecting — scenery, timber, wildlife habitat, and water quality. Land managers must consider highly variable local conditions, and on public lands, the public must be included in the decision-making process. People working directly with Forest Service managers working collaboratively with other interested parties should be able to decide on desired conditions for particular forest areas. Restoring sustainable forest conditions can help ensure the long-term persistence of desired forest values. Recognizing that sustainability is based on economic and social as well as ecological factors, restoration-based fuel reduction is a good starting point for improvement.

Active forest restoration involves changing current conditions using activities prescribed by professional land and resource managers educated at our land-grant universities (Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth is a University of Idaho graduate). Foresters mark all the trees that contribute to desired conditions, loggers cut the rest and haul them away. Foresters use prescribed burning to treat flammable logging slash and recycle nutrients, and periodically to remove undergrowth. In many forests fuel loads have become too high to risk prescribed burning without first doing some thinning and logging.

Conventional wisdom, so often wrong, holds that restoration activities are expensive. Land-grant university research has demonstrated that in fire-adapted forests, ecological restoration treatments can sometimes pay for themselves through the sale of timber byproducts, sometimes with revenues substantially in excess of treatment costs.

To protect ecological system functions that provide values to meet people's expectations now and in the future, active management is superior to allowing wildfire in fuel-clogged forests. Forest Service managers have been designing projects with ends and means developed through local public involvement for 30 years. Now — not later — is the time to implement projects targeting restoration-based fuel reduction.