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The Real Threat is Not What You Expected

Forest Fires in the Klamath Mountains

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As several fires burn in the Klamath Backcountry of northern California and southern Oregon and as tens of millions of taxpayer dollars continue to be expended in efforts to "suppress" these fires, the time is opportune to examine the history of fire and fire suppression in the Klamath Mountains in order to determine if there are lessons for today that can be learned from the experiences of the past 25 years of fire suppression in these mountains.

For local residents and "newcomers" to the Klamath Mountains our first experience with large fires and large Forest Service fire suppression was the Hog Fire of 1977. The jobs and income that flowed from that suppression effort and the salvage logging that followed were seen by most forest residents as an unexpected boon. But a few of us who had worked in the suppression effort also were alarmed by the size and destructive force of the massive backfires which Forest Service managers ordered lit in a futile attempt to stop the wildfire. This alarm was reinforced by natives and old timers who had lived with fire for many decades without resort to bringing in an army of non-local firefighters and massive amounts of equipment. We did not know it then but what we experienced with the Hog Fire was an early stage in the militarization, industrialization and nationalization of fire fighting. That approach to firefighting has grown exponentially since 1977. Today any and all semblance of local control of large fire suppression has been stripped away. We are left with a massive, incredibly expensive, military-style forest fire fighting regime complete with no-bid contractors, air and ground attack components, private mercenaries and a centralized command structure which views local and traditional knowledge and local concerns as public relations issues to be managed not honored.

In spite of the orgies of waste, all this would arguably be worth the cost to taxpayers and the disruption of forest communities if it were in fact effective. But the fire bureaucracies dirty secret is that in rugged mountain areas like the Klamath Mountains efforts at forest fire control and suppression have never been successful in putting out the big fires. Moreover, these failed suppression invasions have generally resulted in more smoke, more intensively burned land and significantly more erosion and ecosystem destruction than would have occurred had the fires been allowed to burn naturally when, as is typical, they were burning far from forest communities and residences.

The list of Klamath Mountains fires larger than 30,000 acres in extent on which massive military-industrial style suppression failed to put out the fire (fires which fall rain and snow eventually put out) includes in addition to the Hog Fire the Grider-Lake, Glasgow, Yellow, Silver, King and other fire complexes in 1987, the Dillon Fire in 1994, the Specimen Fire in 1996, the Megram-Big Bar Fires in 1999 and the Biscuit Fire in 2002. In each of these cases tens of millions of dollars were spent and massive environmental impacts were generated by the suppression efforts. In many cases, not only were Forest Service suppression efforts unsuccessful but they directly led to increased threat to private land and forest communities.

The best documented example of the destructiveness of large fire military-industrial suppression actions is the Big Bar Fire. Extensive analysis of Forest Service suppression effort records by forest activists revealed that the fires which threatened Willow Creek, Denny and Hoopa and forced evacuations of citizens because of smoke-related health threats were in fact back fires ordered by non-local "incident commanders." For "safety reasons" these backfires were lit where road access was available which was many miles from the actual wildfire. The roads also meant that these administrative fires were lit near areas that had been logged. When the winds picked up and reversed direction, the non-natural fires entered recently logged

lands where they "blew up" into fire storms and began their run toward nearby towns and hamlets. Mercifully, however, the rains came and the towns were spared.

The Forest Service never acknowledged that it was the backfires they ordered and lit and not the natural forest fires in the Trinity Alps that threatened the towns. Instead they used the threat and the public's fear of wildfire to argue for massive post-fire salvage logging and against wilderness designation. Forest Service managers even went so far as to use post-fire "emergency fire-line rehabilitation" funds to log the Big Bar fire lines after fall rains had put the fires out. This logging accelerated the massive erosion which military-industrial fire suppression had already created in another failed attempt to suppress a large, backcountry fire.

The largest Forest Service ordered backfire/burn-out in the Big Bar Fire was 23,000 acres; GIS analysis indicated that at minimum 25% of the acres that burned in the Big Bar Fire Complex was Forest Service ordered, non-natural back fires and burn outs and that these suppression-effort fires on average burned hotter and killed more trees per acre as compared to the natural wildfire.

Beginning after the 1987 fires I have walked and studied all the large fire areas of the Klamath Mountains. In all cases, what I learned was consistent with what is reported above for the Big Bar Fire. Even under the most severe fire-risk conditions as we saw in 1987, Forest Service post-fire data and other scientific studies reveal that most of the naturally burned areas had low intensity fire and that most of the trees especially the large Old Growth trees survived the fire. Walking the newly burned forests I learned that at least in the rugged Klamath Mountains – it is not natural wildfire but military-industrial fire suppression which does most of the damage to forest ecosystems and watersheds and which poses the greatest threats to forest communities. The fact that those in charge do not know the land or the history of fire suppression in these mountains constitutes a clear, present and on-going threat to the forests and the communities.

As I write the Forest Service has already lit or is seriously contemplating lighting large backfires in the Orleans Mountain Roadless Area in the lower Salmon River Country. Locals who know the forest's history have been arguing against the backfires. But the nationalization of fire suppression and fire fighting's entrenched bureaucracy appears incapable of acknowledging and using local knowledge and experience. And so we appear doomed to repeat yet again the cycle of mismanagement and community conflict we have experienced since the 1987 fires.

There is a better way. I first experienced it in 1987. Because there were so many fires locally and across the West that year there was no way the Forest Service could actively seek to suppress them all. Therefore, a significant number of 1987 fires burning in the Klamath Mountains were "loose herded." What this means is that a small locally-led crew was dispatched to observe the fires up close and, when opportunities presented, to steer the fires into rocky, sparsely vegetated and more remote areas and away from towns and homesteads. Allowing backcountry fires to burn unless and until they move toward residential areas frees up suppression resources to concentrate on the forest-community interface areas where fires can and should be quickly and aggressively controlled. The restrained, local approach also results in reduced impacts to forest ecosystems and considerably less post-fire erosion and watershed degradation.

This strategy local leadership working with rather than against natural, backcountry fires is both feasible and effective. But it is unlikely to be adopted on a large scale any time soon. That is because the power and profits of the massive fire bureaucracy and the army of no-bid contractors depend on the continuation of the command-and-control military-industrial approach to forest fire suppression and because politicians can manipulate the public's fear of wildfire for their own advantage.

The parallels here with the US Government's present approach to world problems are real and striking. As with the US global-dominance-through-war machine, positive change will only come when the citizens wake up and demand a return to a rational and measured approach to managing wildfires. Until that day, forest communities, forest ecosystems and forest watersheds will continue to suffer from misguided and destructive Forest Service fire suppression boondoggles. Wake up folks, smell the smoke, and then contact your senators and representatives to demand a rational, measured and locally controlled approach to managing natural forest fires!