

Why Western Wildfires Are Getting Larger

The Forest Service says its climate change, the Timber Industry says its lack of logging; in Northwest California some folks say it's intentional.

by Felice Pace

The October 1st edition of the radio science show “Earth and Sky” featured a US Forest Service official asserting that the acreage of individual wildfires has increased dramatically in just a decade. The Deschutes NF in Oregon was provided as an example and Climate Change was held up as the cause for the dramatic change.

These Forest Service assertions were – at best - half truths. The size of western wildfires has also increased dramatically because:

- As [research](#) and experience on the ground have documented, logging usually increases the rate of spread of fire for up to 30 or more years after the area is logged and the extent of logged forests on public and private land has increased over time;
- The FS is regularly increases the size of wildfires with [huge burn outs](#) which they then do not distinguish (subtract) from fire acreage statistics;
- The Bush Administration put Forest Service fire spending on budget; since then some FS managers have used large “burn outs” to increase burned acreage in order to get larger future fire fighting budgets.

Most Forest Service managers – and most press outlets - are in denial concerning the connection between logging and fire. While there is a body of research on the connection between logging and fire intensity, rate of fire spread, etc., this research is rarely if ever mentioned in connection with fire risk. Instead, the timber industry exploits climate change and western wildfires year after year to argue – often through surrogates - that more logging is need to reduce fire risk. This fire season we have seen a flood of such propaganda in the editorial pages of the regions [large](#) and [small](#) newspapers.

There are illustrative examples of Forest Service managers using “burn outs” inappropriately this fire season on the Six Rivers NF. In one instance, Six Rivers National Forest Supervisor Tyrone Kelley ignored the recommendation of cultural specialists from the Yurok and Karuk Tribes and from the incident commander and ordered a massive burn out that about doubled the size of the Siskiyou-Blue 2 Fire and burdened nearby communities with months of additional smoke. In another instance, Forest Service fire managers ignored the warnings of locals and lit a burn-out on the lower Salmon River which jumped containment lines and then raged uphill to threaten several residences.

Two elders – one Indian and one white – died this summer in the Klamath River Country in the midst of months of intense smoke. While a direct connection between the deaths and a summer of unhealthy smoke cannot be established, many local residents are convinced not only that the smoke contributed to the deaths but that a lot of the smoke was not natural but the result of ill-advised and unnecessary Forest Service ordered burn-outs.

[Tales of inappropriate Forest Service burn-outs](#) have also emerged this summer on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Long-time observers believe that the key to the understanding Forest Service managers' decisions is to be found in budget incentives. Ever since the Bush Administration put fire fighting expenditures on budget Forest Service managers have been acting in various ways designed to secure larger fire fighting budgets. One tactic they have used is to transfer funds from fire risk reduction projects to the fire fighting budget. This summer, for example, FS managers informed local Fire Safe Councils that funds which had already been granted for risk reduction projects would not be provided. Forest Service managers are betting disgruntled Fire Safe Council leaders will lobby Congress for vastly increased FS fire fighting funds so that the risk reduction funds on which they depend will not be pulled in future years.

In the case of the Six Rivers National Forest cited above, the supervisor may have been motivated to increase acres burned in this summer's fires so that he could garner a larger share of regional fire fighting funds when next year's national budget is "disaggregated" to individual forests.

I suspect that burned acreage is being unnecessarily expanded via burn-outs on other forests as well. If the acreage burned on the national forests can be increased then Congress is more likely to increase funding for fire suppression next year. The Forest Service official's appearance on *Earth and Sky* can be viewed as part of such a campaign.

The escalating cost of fire suppression has become quite controversial in recent years prompting - among other things - a [review by the Inspector General](#) of the Forest Service's parent agency - the US Department of Agriculture. That audit report extended beyond cost to the issue of Wildland Fire Use (WFU) versus Wildland Fire Suppression (WFS). When they choose to use WFU, managers allow natural wildfires to burn where life and property are not at risk.

Largely unknown to outsiders, there is a struggle going on within the Forest Service and the national firefighting bureaucracy concerning WFS v WFU. The firefighting bureaucracy has grown large and powerful as a result of the exponential increase in Wildland Fire Suppression expenditures. And in recent decades an army of private contractors have grown rich providing fire suppression equipment and services to the Forest Service and other federal land management agencies. The bureaucracy and the contractors know that the size of their budgets and profits respectively depend on a continuation of the military approach to fire suppression. Wildland Fire Use is a different approach which requires restraint and lowers cost. Therefore WFU is a threat to the power of the firefighting bureaucracy and the profits of fire suppression contractors.

Pressure from Congress to reduce firefighting costs and from a growing number of Forest Service managers and firefighters who recognize the insanity of the high-tech, high-cost military approach to fighting wildfire is beginning to have an impact. When one adds to this the growing pressure from local residents who believe the huge burn-outs, huge expenditures and increased smoke resulting from military-style fire suppression are not necessary, the prospects for positive change appear to be gaining ground.

For the first time in several decades it appears that the trajectory of fire fighting policy and practice in the American West may be shifting toward change and sanity. Stay tuned.