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What Do You Mean They're Not Suppressing the Fire? What is Fire Use?

Lightning strikes a tree in a remote area of the Forest. The fire grows to more than 2,000 acres, and you say the Forest officials are doing what?! Monitoring the fire, instead of suppressing it? What's happening here? That's a good question.

For more than 100 years, fire has been considered "bad business." The philosophy has been to put it out at all costs no matter what it takes! The truth of the matter is, not all fire is bad. In fact, fire is one of the most natural things about nature. Fire enhances the ecosystem's ability to sustain nutrient cycles and regulate productivity. Nutrients released as a result of fires are quickly utilized at the fire site by new vegetation. Our good intentions, to suppress all fires, have not gone as planned. The current condition of many of the Forests is reflective of the absence of natural fire, which just enhances likelihood of wildfire. Over the past few years, this Country has experienced some of its most devastating wildfires, due in a large part to the condition of the Forests; and we are now faced with exorbitant rehabilitation efforts as a result.

Does that mean that any natural start in the Forest will be allowed to become a wildland fire use fire no matter what? Of course not, Wildland Fire Use is the management of naturally ignited Wildland fires to achieve resource benefits, where fire has been an important component in the evolution of the ecosystem. Areas of the Forest are evaluated well in advance of fire season. Decision criteria are established for each of these areas. As always, the first, and most important, factor in the decision-making process is public and firefighter safety. In other words, in the expert's best judgment, will it be safe to allow fire use in order to obtain the ecological benefits. After that consideration, a battery of other criteria, to include smoke monitoring, must be met in order to utilize fire use management for resource benefit.

Who manages these fires? Nationally, just like fire suppression teams, there are Fire Use Management Teams on call, 24 hours a day. These overhead teams are comprised of long-range planners, fuels management specialists, and fire behavior analysts. Their job is to assess fire potential and manage operations to keep fires within their prescribed borders.

What happens if the fire expands to an area not suitable for fire use? Fire Use fires are monitored closely; and if they begin to pose problems, they are treated as wildland fires and suppression work begins immediately.

Today, prudent land managers recognize the need for periodic fires to maintain the health of the Forest, and they design fire management plans to help restore fire to its natural role. Through the practical use of wildland fire use management, we can maximize the benefits of wildland fire to the ecosystem; and ultimately, reduce the damages and threats to public health and safety.

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