

November 17, 2002

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RE: 1950 Toolbox Fire Recovery Project

The same day that I received the "request for public comment" letter on the Toolbox Fire the alumni magazine from the University of Oregon came. In it there was an article which I have enclosed which mentions the Toolbox Fire.

One of the inconsistencies I noted was that your letter indicated that the fire covered 85,000 acres while the article indicated 300,000 acres. The article discussed several paradoxes about fire fighting which are worth discussion -

1. Costs and particularly what happens when budgets are exceeded and funds have to come from other sources.
2. Damage done by the fire fighting efforts - i.e. bulldozers crossing alpine meadows ; contaminated water used in fighting fires; creation of roads to fight fire, etc.
3. The use of backfires and the damage they create.
4. How logging caused potential future fire problems
5. The high cost of protecting homes in "fire plain" areas

None of these items appear to be addressed in your letter. The circulation of the magazine is probably large enough and read enough that these questions will be raised by others. It would seem to be reasonable that they be responded to either at your level or by the Fremont Forest or the NW Region.

My specific concerns would be that even if a reforestation plan is developed do you have the funds to put it into effect. What efforts are being made to correlate the proposed plan with private land owners? If they can't afford or don't want to do anything how does that affect your plan? What is to be done with privately owned structures that are in a potential "fire plain" and how are they to be protected, or will they be?

Very truly yours


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The 2002 fire season caught everyone off guard. Coinciding with a record-breaking drought that affected most of the continental United States, wildfires erupted much earlier in the season, spread faster, and burned hotter than anticipated. News stories highlighted the peril to rural homeowners and whole communities that had unknowingly settled in a "fire plain" and faced the equivalent of the 100-year flood of fire. Despite thousands of extra fire fighters hired under the National Fire Plan, the world's largest fire fighting force couldn't stop one of nature's most powerful forces from imposing its will upon the land. Oregon was an epicenter of wildfire activity, home to two of the largest wildfires in the country: the 491,500-acre Biscuit Fire and the approximately 300,000-acre Toolbox Fire, and several other large fires that cumulatively burned over one million acres. The 2002 fire season was full of superlatives, with several Western states experiencing the largest, costliest, most destructive fires in their histories. Experts predict that the long, hot summer was but a harbinger of more frequent severe fire seasons to come, with potentially dire effects on species, ecosystems, and communities unless fundamental changes are made in society's relationship with forests and fires. Those changes will be difficult to make until we understand and resolve some of the cultural and institutional paradoxes that characterize our relationship with forest fires.

PARADOX #1: FIGHTING FIRE

Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is that we exist in an endless and escalating state of war against wildland fire, one of nature's most primal, vital, evolutionary forces. From the first instance when the federal government put out wildfires with U.S. cavalrymen in Yellowstone National Park in the 1880s, federal fire management policy has been framed by the war metaphor: "fighting" fire. Smokey Bear, in fact, was created in 1944 by the Wartime Advertising Council working at the behest of the U.S. Forest Service, and promoted militaristic slogans on fire prevention posters. Following World War II and the Korean War, surplus military aircraft, vehicles, and equipment were used for wildland fire fighting. Beginning with the "siege of '87" in Oregon and California, and continuing with the Yellowstone Fires of 1988, the severe fire seasons of the 1990s, and the firestorms of 2000 and 2002, infantry soldiers were mobilized to help fight forest fires.

Thanks to Smokey Bear's "pyroganda" and news coverage that demonizes wildfires, most people believe that all forest fires should be attacked by any means necessary.

As in every other form of military combat, the war on wildfire exacts a toll in human casualties. The 2002 season cost the lives of twenty-one fire fighters. Dozens more were injured this year, and many others will suffer from sickness in the future due to lingering effects of excessive smoke inhalation. Wildland fire fighting is inherently hazardous duty. We should not send out young people to fight fire unless it is absolutely necessary. Protecting the lives and homes of fellow citizens is a valid and noble reason for assuming these risks; suppressing fire from burning through fire-dependent ecosystems in remote roadless and wilderness areas is not.

Making war also exacts an economic toll, and the 2002 season was the most expensive season in history. Suppression

costs have exceeded \$1.6 billion, and the bills are still pouring in. Oregon's Biscuit Fire was the nation's most expensive fire, costing nearly \$150 million for suppression efforts alone, excluding the expense of rehabilitating areas damaged by fire fighting. Unlike all other federal agencies except, significantly, the Department of Defense, federal land management agencies can engage in deficit spending to fight fires. When the agencies exhaust their suppression budgets, they take money from their budgets for recreation, reforestation, or ironically, fuels reduction to pay for fire fighting, and then ask Congress for reimbursements. Congress routinely writes these checks for hundreds of millions of tax dollars with no questions asked. In this period when budgets for education, health care, and environmental protection are being dramatically cut, how long can the nation sustain billion-dollar expenses for an endless war against wildfire?

Finally, aggressive fire fighting does significant "collateral damage" to the natural environment. On the Biscuit Fire, for example, more than 400 miles of perimeter fire line were carved into steep, forested mountainsides using everything from shovels and bulldozers to explosives; more than 50,000 acres were torched by high-intensity backfires; hundreds of thousands of gallons of toxic fire retardant chemicals were dumped on the ground; and many big, old wildlife habitat trees were leveled as "hazard trees." These are all routine impacts of fire fighting, but unique to the Biscuit Fire, bulldozers plowed through meadows covered with rare endemic plants like the *Darlingtonia*, and fire engines and helicopters dropped water contaminated with the dreaded Port Orford Cedar root rot disease into previously unaffected watersheds. In actuality, fire fighting is a misnomer: We don't really fight fires, we fight forests.

The paradox of our hostile relations towards wildland fire is that what had formerly been revered as humankind's friend, enabling homo sapiens to become human beings and dwell in formerly uninhabitable regions of the planet, is now feared as a threat to civilization. Fire has been used on the landscape for millenia by nearly every indigenous culture on Earth. Native Americans increased the bounty of their harvests and hunts by using fire to stimulate nature's regenerative powers. Over the span of 700 human generations, most of the native flora and fauna in Western forests and grasslands co-evolved with frequent Native American burning that often occurred in the early spring and late fall, supplementing the inevitable summer lightning storms. Our best hope of resolving the paradox and making peace with wildland fire is to recover that forgotten past and restore indigenous practices of "light burning:" safely herding low-intensity prescribed fires across the forest floor during cool, moist conditions in order to replenish our fire-starved forest ecosystems.

PARADOX #2: FIRE FIGHTERS AS FIRE LIGHTERS

Despite more than fifty years of Smokey Bear's social conditioning trying to instill pyrophobia (the fear and hatred of fire), every campfire attests to our innate and inextinguishable pyrophilia (the fascination and love of fire). In

truth, fire fighters would much prefer to be fire lighters. The old adage "fight fire with fire" is standard procedure; indeed, fire lines are where fires are paradoxically started in order to be stopped. One of the reasons that Oregon was home to two of the largest "super-fires" in the country was that the Toolbox and Winter Fires in southeastern Oregon, and the Florence and Sour Biscuit Fires in southwestern Oregon, were separate fires deliberately brought together through backfire operations, then renamed as the Toolbox and Biscuit Fires, respectively.

Backfires are ignited to burn up the vegetation ahead of an advancing flame front, or to merge several small fires into a single large fire that is more efficient for encircling with a fire line. On the Biscuit Fire, a daring thirty-mile-long, 40,000-acre burnout operation successfully stopped the wildfire from spreading into the Illinois Valley, home to 17,000 residents. But in 2000, errant backfires created their own firestorm disasters, including the destruction of hundreds of homes in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and in the Bitterroot Valley, Montana. Even when backfires are successful in containing wildfire spread, they can do serious damage to the environment. By design, backfires are intended to inflict high tree mortality and to consume all small-diameter fuels "from ground to crown." In effect, backfires are set to create a solid swath of scorched earth that leaves nothing for the main fire to burn. Residents of the Illinois Valley learned to identify backfires because they spewed large roiling black smoke columns — a sure sign of high-intensity fire hurling up larger-sized particulates — which differed from the diffuse clouds of gray-brown smoke normally emitted from the wildfire alone.

When fire fighters ignite backfires during weather conditions least amenable to human control and most conducive to extreme fire behavior and severe effects, they are cheered on as heroes. But when they light prescribed fires during weather conditions most amenable to human control with moderate fire behavior and low severity, they are sometimes jeered as villains for fouling the air with smoke or letting an occasional prescribed fire escape control. Until we overcome this double standard between backfires and prescribed fires, we will continue to see more superfires caused by fighting fire with fire.

systems to wildland fires, it calls into question our current management regimen of "emergency" fire fighting followed quickly by "emergency" salvage logging, all in the name of preventing "catastrophic" wildfires.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Forest Service refuses to study the merits of the citizens' proposal or to fund its own research projects in the Burn. Regardless, young people are nurturing a new relationship to forests and fires in the Warner Burn, offering inspiration that we can evolve beyond the paradoxes of fire management policy.

How can these paradoxes of fire be resolved? Some of them will be relatively easy, a matter of employing reason and facts and promoting community interests against hysteria, fallacies, and corporate interests. The public's taxes and trees should not be sacrificed

for management practices that increase the occurrence of severe wildfires, accelerate the decline of forest ecosystem health, and fail to protect homes and communities. There is a legitimate role for government to help people fireproof their own homes and protect their communities through education, technical assistance, low-interest loans, and need-based grants. This would make a wise social investment, for the sooner we protect our communities from fire, the sooner we can begin restoring our forests with fire. Thus, we begin to develop fire-adapted communities instead of further degrading fire-dependent forests.

Other paradoxes will not be so easy to resolve without a paradigm shift in our relationship with nature. The war on wildfire strikes a deep, resonant chord with Western civilization's historical quest to control nature, and powerful political and economic forces have

stakes in perpetuation of the war, for it is a source of power and profits. But making wildland fire an adversary puts us in an untenable position: We may win all the battles against blazes, but it is an endless, escalating, and unwinnable war. For as sure as the sun shines, the rain falls, vegetation grows and dies, and lightning strikes, there will be fires burning our pyrogenic wildlands. The ultimate resolution of these paradoxes is to learn to make peace with wildland fire and rediscover our ecological role as torchbearers wisely applying prescribed fire to nurture the vitality and sustainability of forest ecosystems and their human communities.

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