

In Order to Extinguish Forest Fires, Don't Let Logging Burn Out

Brief Analysis No. 631

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September 10, 2008

Federal mismanagement of U.S. forests has increased the number, size and cost of wildfires over the past decade. Historically, the national forests have been logged to provide lumber for commercial activities, to promote forest recreation, species protection and management, and to prevent wildfires.



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In recent decades this has changed. Pressure and lawsuits from environmental lobbyists have prevented or delayed both commercial and salvage logging, turning many of our national forests into tinderboxes.

The Growing Cost of Wildfires.

California alone boasts more than 16 million acres of national forests. Between 1997 and 2007, wildfires in California burned more than 8,500 square miles — an area larger than New Jersey.

On October 21, 2007, Southern California witnessed one of the worst fires in U.S. history. Sixteen wildfires burned nearly 500,000 acres, destroyed 1,300 homes, required the evacuation of half a million people, injured 25 firefighters and civilians, and killed three people. Unfortunately, such devastating fires are no longer unusual.

Ten to 20 years ago, a wildfire exceeding 100,000 acres was deemed to be catastrophic and a sign of an unusually severe fire season. Today, such large-scale fires are the rule rather than the exception. For instance, in 1998 there were 81,043 wildfires, burning 1,329,704 acres; but in 2007, 85,705 fires burned 9,328,045

acres. [See Figure I.] Four of the nation's 10 largest wildfires over the last decade, each scorching more than 250,000 acres, occurred in 2007. This year, from June 20 to July 25, fires burned 1,078,616 acres, with the number of simultaneous fires peaking at 2,095.

Halfway through the 2008 fire season, California had already spent more than \$300 million fighting fires, compared to just \$44 million per year a decade ago. U.S. Forest Service spending on firefighting rose from \$300 million in 1997 to \$1.5 billion in 2006 and \$1.4 billion in 2007.

Forest Overcrowding. Logging of national forests has fallen dramatically over the past two decades. Timber harvests in the 155 national forests have plunged 75 percent from 12 billion board feet per year in the 1980s to less than 4 billion board feet per year. The result? Historically, large ponderosa pines in the Western national forests grew in stands of 20 to 55 trees per acre; today they grow in densities of 300 to 900 trees per acre. [See Figure II.] National forests in California have an estimated 10 to 20 times more trees than is “natural” — making them dangerously overcrowded.

Overcrowding contributes to the continuing decline in forests' health. It also increases the likelihood and severity of fires. According to Forest Service figures, fully 60 percent of national forest land is unhealthy and faces abnormal fire hazards, includ-

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ing more than 90 million acres rated at high risk for catastrophic fires.

Overcrowding also changes the nature of the fires themselves. Forests that aren't actively managed, including logging, face more high-intensity/high temperature fires that destroy the trees, saplings, and seeds and microbes in the soil itself. Years of drought, insect infestations and disease add to the severity of fires.

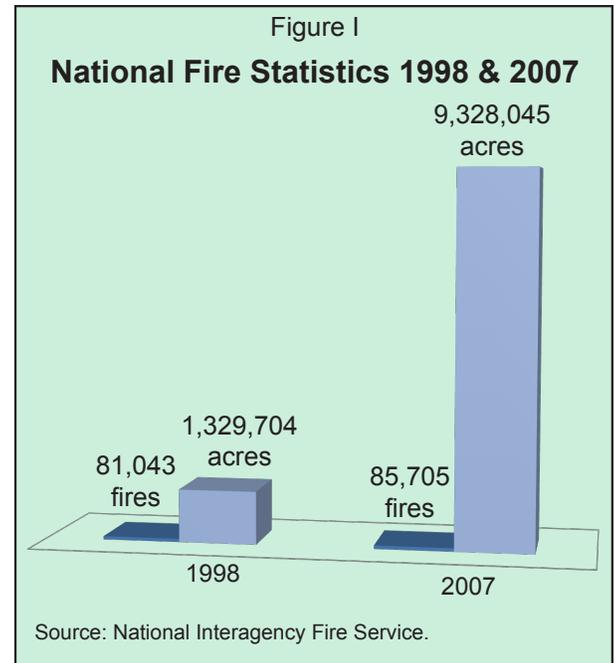
Bureaucratic paralysis — due in part to judges or politicians beholden to environmental lobbyists overriding the decisions of professional foresters — has led to national forests that are either overused or ignored. For instance, when a wildfire struck near Storrie, Calif., in August 2000, more than 55,000 acres burned, including 28,000 acres in the Plumas National Forest, 27,000 acres in the Lassen National Forest and approximately 3,200 acres of private forestland managed by W.M. Beaty and Associates. Following the fire, in the 27,000-acre Lassen National Forest, only 1,206 acres were cleared and 230 acres replanted. In the Plumas National Forest, only 181 of more than 28,000 acres were reforested. By contrast, on the privately owned land:

- The private forest managers reduced wildfire by removing 30,633 tons of dry material, enough to fuel 3,600 homes for a year.
- They harvested enough larger dead trees to build 4,300 homes.
- And they spent millions of dollars to reforest burned land and increased the number of different tree species.

Even when federal legislation has specifically allowed the forest service to log over-crowded or previously burned lands to reduce fire risk, environmentalists' lawsuits have delayed and limited the ability to carry out logging plans, increasing wildfires while reducing the ability to fight them.

In 2004, U.S. forestry officials announced they would expand the amount of logging allowed in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in order to reduce wildfires. The plan permitted logging on 700,000 acres over the following 20 years. More recently,

in May 2008, the California Supreme Court approved the clear-cutting of more than 1,000 acres in the Sierra Nevada to curb the increasing number of wildfires. These efforts are a step in the right direction, but they are not enough, as it will take decades for these relatively small increases in



logging to reduce forest fuel loads substantially.

Conclusion. The government should introduce market competition in the management of the nation's forests. Some forests, or portions of some national forests, could be sold outright to the highest bidders. Alternatively, some forests could be managed by private organizations in return for fees.

Private forest owners and managers would have the incentive to minimize wildfires and improve forest health. Unhindered by bureaucratic federal rules, they would be better able to prevent and treat infestations that kill forests. Promptly removing dead and dying timber can prevent infestations from spreading and prevent potentially catastrophic fires. Private companies keep the number of trees per acre at an optimal level. This reduces fire hazards and lets sunlight reach the forest floor, which helps regrowth and biodiversity.

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