



Forests and Fires: Perfect Together, However...

BY ROBERT WILLIAMS

Foresters and landowners in the forestry community are very aware of the impact of fires on our landscapes. Many of us use fire to provide conservation stewardship to forest ecosystems. As we now see with the ongoing historical wildfire events across the U.S., society needs to assess ways to live with fire, as opposed to continuing the long-term war on fire.

The debate now rages whether climate change is causing these catastrophic wildfires. Little consideration is given to the long-term, benign neglect of our public forests and its effects. People must begin to understand and accept that fire in the forest is as natural as rain or sunshine; it's how we need fires to behave in the forest that has become a concern.

Fire has helped forests evolve for thousands of years. Many people remain under the illusion that prior to European settlement, forests in North America were carpets of pristine, old-growth forests. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most forests were occupied and intentionally managed by Native Americans and fire was their primary tool.

I'm not suggesting we can go back to the methods Native Americans utilized to sustain forested lands, but we can learn much from them. Mitigating the damages resulting from uncontrolled massive wildfire is going to take many years and complex solutions. We didn't get here over night, but by decades of poor land management decisions, policies and government regulation.

The past 40 years of hands-off preservationist policy discouraging active conservation stewardship on the land has led to forests overstocking themselves—an unnatural buildup of fire fuels in both quantity and structure, resulting in increased size and intensity of forest fires. Politicians have accepted the premise of “Mother Nature knows best, thus, leave it alone.” This thinking has resulted in disaster.

Additionally, we have permitted construction of homes, businesses, and infrastructure in fire-prone landscapes, only exasperating the overall fire problem.

As to climate change issues, our forests should be a major component of solving that problem. They should be carbon sinks that help naturally remove CO₂ from our atmosphere. Instead, they are at risk to become a major source of carbon release.

Throughout the country, the forest is too overgrown to apply prescribed fire, so tree removal is required. In many areas, we simply cannot burn our way out of the crisis. We must integrate planned tree and timber harvesting. Of course, harvesting trees is the activity that has caused many special interests to block forest management by any means

politically and socially. This has resulted in a dramatic decline in active forest management on most public lands over the past 50-plus years.

The good news is we have many excellent examples of integrated burning and thinning that has resulted in restored forest ecosystems that are aesthetically beautiful, more resilient to fire and insects, and more biologically diverse than the neglected lands nearby. One can visit the beautiful restoration of Ponderosa Pine systems in Arizona, Oregon and Washington, the beautiful conifer forests in the mountains of California, or the beautiful restoral long leaf pine forests of Florida and Georgia. It is unfortunate that the work done is only a drop in the bucket as to the scale of things that needs to be done in all regions.

The use of fire has its limitations, thus mechanical removal or treatment of trees remains an essential tool. Many areas are too close to homes or infrastructure and smoke becomes a real problem. Getting the right weather conditions on a given day to allow for the intentional setting of a fire is very limited and difficult. There are also ecological concerns at times. Allowing a fire to destroy a seed bank or burn into the turf can have devastating impacts to some ecosystems. The bottom line is that this is all complex. But we need to get on with what we know works.

The management of many of our forests requires an understanding of the fire ecology of those forests. It is not possible technically, physically or economically to apply management to all our conserved forest lands. Thus, nature will continue to be a partner in our forest management strategies.

None of this will be easy. Much of the restoration work requires the removal of small-diameter trees with no markets for this wood. Our new vision for forest and fire policy will need to consider the economic and tax policies that can make the needed work economically feasible. Utilizing wood fiber for renewable energy may be one of the key players in the needed forest restoration and management program. Biomass, small-diameter timber, pulpwood and wood chips all will play a role.

Here in southern New Jersey, we have a fire culture on the land. Family forest landowners along with state fire wardens burn forests annually without concern or problem. It can be done—come see for yourselves.

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