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Treat homes, not forests, to reduce wildfire risk

by [GEORGE WUERTHNER](#) on FEBRUARY 17, 2019 • 2 COMMENTS • in [WILDLIFE NEWS](#)

Recently Donald Trump used his executive authority to mandate increased logging of our public lands with the goal of reducing wildfire threat to communities. His order instructs land managers to treat (read log) 8.45 million acres of land and cut 4.4 million board feet of timber ostensibly to reduce fire hazard.

Unfortunately, the mandate ignores the latest fire science which suggests you start at the home and work outwards to reduce fire risk to communities. It's time to change our fire policy to reflect what we are learning about the role of global heating in fire ecology and forest ecology.

Trying to minimize fire which is natural to most plant community in the West is wrong-headed. Instead, we must promote effective strategies that allow communities to persist in fire-prone ecosystems. We do this by reducing home construction in fire-prone landscapes and by reducing the flammability of homes.

Current fire policies focus on promoting forest alterations, mainly through logging, to change fire severity. It is the lack of high severity fire that impoverishes many forest ecosystems.

Trump's policies will harm forest ecosystems, while logging is one of the leading contributors to global GHG emissions, exacerbating global heating.

Most fires are small-burning less than 5 acres. These fires occur during low to moderate fire weather conditions. Though they account for 95-98% of all fires, they burn a small percentage of the landscape, and few threaten communities.

It is the 1-2% of very rare large blazes that occur during extreme fire weather that shape forest ecosystem. These enormous fires only occur during periods of drought, high temperatures, low humidity and periods with high winds. When these conditions occur in synch with an ignition, we get unstoppable wildfires.

However, high severity blazes are essential to healthy forest ecosystems. Large wildfires are one of the primary agents responsible for creating snags, down wood, and other changes that are critical to maintaining functional forest ecosystems.

Under such conditions, thinning/logging and prescribed burning do little to alter the outcome. With wind driving embers sometimes miles ahead of a flaming front, any "active management" is not going to halt the blaze.

Even more troubling is the fact that most "fuel treatments" do not ever encounter a wildfire. And the percentage of treated land that encounters a blaze under extreme fire weather conditions is much smaller.

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Research has demonstrated that wildfire severity is greatest in forests that are “actively managed” which is a euphemism for logging.

Most of the assumptions about “forest health” wildfire “severity” and other misinformation are based upon the 20th Century forest climate. What we need are new policies that consider the different 21st Century climate affecting our forests ecosystems.

Under the global heating, wildfires are going to be more common. Wildfire is inevitable, but home losses are not. We must revise our strategy to make homes and community fire-safe, not waste funds on antiquated forest policies.

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2 Responses to *treat homes, not forests, to reduce wildfire risk*



Parvati Hyden says:

February 18, 2019 at 10:14 am

This is a really excellent overview of the issues of “forest management” by the US Forest Service. The Forest Service has made so many mistakes in the past with clear-cut logging, grazing, unregulated off-road vehicle use, and too much fire suppression, yet they believe they know how to “manage” the forests now. Maybe they don’t, and maybe they should reconsider their approach and take newer forest and fire ecology research more into account. I hope they will for the sake of our forests.

REPLY



Kimberly says:

February 19, 2019 at 8:41 am

This is such an important piece. Thank you BLM staff for reading and resisting Trump. Common sense is on the side of hardening structures and keeping development away from our much needed and maligned forested watersheds. Thank you BLM staff and George.

REPLY

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