Rethinking Federal Fire Management Policy

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Journals from Lewis and Clark's expedition tell of a landscape smothered with smoke from nearby forest fires as the expedition made its way through what is now western Montana. Yet, Lewis and Clark's journals provide much more than a historical curiosity, they reveal the historical presence and importance of fire in the West. The never-ending pine forests that Lewis and Clark found in Montana and Idaho nearly 200 years ago were evidence of an ecosystem that had evolved alongside fire. Yet, the federal policy of suppressing fires in national forests, a campaign that began in the early 1900's in order to harvest more timber, effectively altered the composition and character of Western forests over the next 75 years and possibly forever.

Without fire to keep encroaching vegetation in check, smaller trees have grown unimpeded and forest tree-densities have soared. Some national forests currently report higher-than-average tree densities on as much as 50% of forest stands. With more of this smaller vegetation competing for precious resources in the dry climate of the Interior West, larger old-growth trees have become weaker and more vulnerable to disease and pests. A survey of the Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico revealed that round-headed pine beetles have infested 57% of Ponderosa pine stands. In the Deschutes National Forest, dwarf mistletoe disease infects 40% of its mixed conifer and Ponderosa pine. Needless to say, today's Western forests are much altered from the fire-resilient Ponderosa pine forests of the 1800's. In the Idaho Panhandle alone, an estimated 67% of the Ponderosa pine's natural territory has been taken over by fire-susceptible Douglas fir and mixed conifers.

The overaccumulation of thinner, fire-susceptible vegetation on 39 million acres of national forest has made the national forest system vulnerable to large, catastrophic wildfires, a reality made all too clear with the tragic events in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Now officially known as the Cerro Grande Fire, the conflagration that consumed Los Alamos painfully demonstrated that federal fire management agencies are hard-pressed to deal with the tinderbox that the drought-stricken West has become. Cerro Grande started on May 4, 2000 as a prescribed burn near Bandalier National Monument. It was supposed to encompass 900 acres. Fifteen days and $1 billion dollars in damages later, Cerro Grande had blazed across 48,000 acres and 280 homes. Lessons learned from the Cerro Grande fire indicate that federal fire management agencies must work more cooperatively and must develop interagency standards in order to combat wildfires more effectively. Sadly, inconsistencies between Park Service and Forest Service definitions of when emergency "contingency" resources (helicopters, bulldozers, firefighters) may be dispatched caused delays which resulted in more property damage and resource loss to the fire.

However, the destruction of the Los Alamos township, which is on the border of the Santa Fe National Forest, is indicative of the fire-risk posed to other Western communities. The growth of communities in close proximity to national forests has created a "wildland/urban interface" that poses new challenges to federal fire management agencies. Western forests may be attractive because of the scenic beauty and recreational opportunities that they offer, but a glance at a map of "frequent fire forests," those forests in which fires occur every 5 to 30 years, reveals that many counties in the Interior West are virtually superimposed on forests that periodically burn.

Unfortunately, federal fire management agencies don't always have the tools necessary to contend with fire risks associated with the wildland/urban interface. The Forest Service, for example, utilizes a simulation program known as the National Fire Management Assessment System (NFMAS). Each national forest uses NFMAS to determine allocations for presuppression and suppression resources. NFMAS works by first simulating a fire and then determining the difference in the value of forest resources before and after the fire. Generally, as presuppression costs

rise, suppression costs drop, and the damage to forest resources abates. However, those resources don't include buildings or property located in the wildland/urban interface. NFMAS only recognizes values for Forest Service lands. Fires that spread into other federal lands or into the wildland/ urban interface are not taken into account. Thus, NFMAS significantly underestimates the true cost of firefighting and almost ensures inadequate firefighting resources in these populated areas.

Yet, there does seem to be some light at the end of the tunnel. In April of 2000, the Forest Service released *Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems—A Cohesive Strategy*. Written as a response to a GAO report spotlighting the threat of catastrophic wildfires in the West, the Forest Service's strategy lays forth an aggressive effort to treat and thin 40 million acres of forest in the Interior West by 2015. Some concerns voiced by those outside of the Forest Service charged that the agency would merely concentrate on treating acres at low-risk for fire, since these areas would be least costly to treat. However, the Forest Service's strategy outlines a commitment to prioritize high-risk areas, for these areas pose the largest threat to neighboring communities and typically consume the most suppression resources. The strategy also realizes the need for interagency standards for fighting fires and the mandate to employ a larger "ecosystem management" approach to addressing the fuels problem. Perhaps the most progressive of the plan is the drive to integrate social science with fire science. A recognition of the unique problems of the West's wildland/urban interface and a renewed commitment to involve community stakeholders in forest restoration efforts forms the most visionary basis of the Forest Service's efforts.

Although the results of the Cerro Grande Fire were tragic and, to some extent, preventable, federal fire management agencies need not allow the mistakes of the past to hinder efforts to circumvent tragedies in the future. The proliferation of communities along the wildland/urban interface simply attests to the fact that people continue to be fascinated with nature. The citizens of Los Alamos learned all too well the effects of a federal land management policy that emphasized merchantable timber over ecosystem values. Perhaps the wildfires racing across the West will form the crucible that produces a new stewardship ethic and respect for the nation's forests. Only the ashes will tell.

IPF Proposals for Action: An International Agreement for Sustainable Forests

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In 1997, the UN Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF) recommended 147 Proposals for Action to the international community, to address a range of forest problems at the global level. In developing the Proposals, the IPF was mandated to ""pursue a consensus and formulate...actions in order to combat deforestation and forest degradation, and to promote the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests."[1]

The Proposals for Action represent progress and considerable consensus toward the advancement of sustainable forest management worldwide. The international community, including the U.S., has agreed to implement the 147 Proposals in some manner consistent with national political, social, and economic limits. Countries involved have been urged to undertake a systematic assessment of the Proposals in the context of their national forest programs and national policy frameworks in a coordinated manner, with the participation of interested persons.

Although the participants in the IPF process are not legally bound by the Proposals, there is a world political obligation to give effect to the IPF Proposals. The Proposals contain measures to be taken at the international and national levels. There are few indications in the IPF report regard-