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A substitute plan to rejuvenate forest after fire

A century of fire suppression has left forests overcrowded with dense stands of flammable conifers

After fires last year in Klamath National Forest, plans were made to salvage as much timber as possible

Members of the Karuk Tribe have offered a substitute plan instead of salvage logging

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Western forests have evolved with fire. Scientists call it a keystone ecological process as essential as sunshine and rain. However well we understand this, Smokey Bear's admonition is deeply entrenched. When flames leap through trees and smoke clogs the air, most of us recoil in horror, fearing the loss of homes and habitat, commercial timber and lives.

Forest managers have responded by putting fires out. The U.S. Forest Service has been suppressing fire since 1911, even adopting a policy calling for quelling all flames by [10 a.m. the day following the initial report](#). Ironically, a century of suppression has left forests overcrowded with dense stands of flammable conifers. The number of wildfires is increasing by [7 percent annually](#), scorching forests earlier in the season and burning with twice the intensity of the previous 100 years, studies have found.

Scientists and forest managers alike know fire belongs on the landscape, but they are flummoxed by how to reintroduce it under today's tinderbox conditions.

A controversy now playing out in California's northwest corner is a typical result, but this one hints at how we might resolve this dilemma.

Last summer, lightning sparked a series of fires in the Klamath National Forest, burning through 183,000 acres of Douglas fir and mixed conifers. Left with "black trees on black ground," Klamath's forest supervisor, Patricia Grantham, did what most agency officials would: She coordinated plans to salvage as much timber as possible before it loses market value. The result is the [Westside Project](#), which Grantham expects to finalize this month.

It calls for logging about 6,800 acres of severely burned forest. Most areas will be clear-cut and bulldozed to allow planting seedling trees. Additional logging along up to 150 miles of roads brings the total to about 9,000 acres of post-fire logging. The plan calls for some intentional burning to reduce ground fuels, but Grantham told me harvesting large trees is the project's biggest contribution to preparing for future fires.

The Westside Project has triggered a reaction as predictable as the plan to salvage logs. Environmental groups are vehemently opposed and will use "every tool we have to enforce the laws being broken and the science being swept under the rug," said George Sexton, conservation director for [Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center](#). About 70 percent of the logging is planned for mature forests designated as ecological reserves that provide critical wildlife corridors.

The management failure that produced this familiar fight also has failed to produce creative resolutions. The Westside Project may prove an exception. Members of the Karuk Tribe have offered a substitute for salvage logging.

The Karuks have managed this landscape for millennia, using fire to maintain tan oak and coho salmon habitat. Their alternative to wildfire/logging/lawsuit gridlock: [more fire](#). Where the Forest Service proposes to log, the Karuk would instead light intentional burns on nearly 31,000 acres. Where the agency plans to plant conifer seedlings, the Karuk would let nature do the work, leaving seed trees to reforest the hillsides.

Instead of catastrophe, the Karuks view the 2014 Klamath wildfires as an opportunity to begin the slow process of forest restoration, said Russell "Buster" Attebery, the tribe's chairman. It's a philosophically different approach from the tactics that have guided forest management for the last century.

The Forest Service model of controlling fire is not working. The Karuk model might not work, either. It would almost certainly face strict air regulations as well as local opposition to harvesting less timber. And because the burns would take place over several years and natural reforestation even longer, it would require time we may not have. Yet even as a hypothetical plan, the Karuk alternative inspires hope. It replaces management driven by fear of fire with management that embraces it.

As we stumble toward accepting fire as a natural process, the Karuks offer the prospect of understanding what species depend on scorched stands, how fire transforms the energy of a forest and rejuvenates habitat. That knowledge would surely make us safer.

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