

OCTOBER 3, 2015

Transformation of wildfires presents new challenges

Wildfire seasons lengthened by nearly 20 percent

Forest Service doubles down on suppression

Policy of fighting every fire called 'dangerous, expensive'

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The 2015 California fire season is like no other, setting tragic records for lives claimed and buildings destroyed. The 807,000 acres scorched across the state are part of the 9 million acres burned and still smoking around the West – 3 million more than the average for the last decade.

The size and behavior of this year's fires have seared us with this certainty: Wildfire itself is changing. Firefighters on the Valley and Rocky fires in Lake County faced erratic infernos that raced up hills, then reversed themselves, charging back down with a red-hot fury even the most seasoned among them had never experienced. In July, fires burned in Olympic National Park in Washington state despite its annual drenching with 140 inches of precipitation. These are not the wildfires of yesteryear.

Scientists monitoring wildfire trends have [documented](#) hotter and drier weather conditions around the world. Combined with fewer days of rain, they found that

fire seasons lengthened by nearly 20 percent and the burned acreage doubled between 1979 and 2013. The U.S. Forest Service [reported](#) in August that fire seasons across the nation are 78 days longer than in the 1970s.

California [researchers](#) predict higher temperatures, increased evaporation and reduced precipitation that could increase acreage burned in the state by 169 percent by 2085.

We are witnessing the transformation of fire from an essential element of most forest ecosystems – as vital as sunshine and rain – into a feral force. Megafires are joining calving glaciers and rising sea levels as one more indication that the Earth is warming.

The Forest Service has [responded](#) to this escalation by doubling down on suppression and appealing to Congress for more money to fight the 2 percent of ignitions that grow into severe wildfires. These costs now consume well over half the agency’s entire budget, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell says.

His campaign to battle megafire with megabucks has generated a call for a contrary approach. In a [paper](#) published last month in the journal *Science*, lead author Malcolm North, a Davis-based Forest Service ecologist, argues that the traditional policy of fighting every fire is “dangerous, expensive and ill-advised.” Instead, he and his colleagues propose dividing the landscape into zones using different management strategies.

In areas close to homes, management would emphasize using chainsaws and other mechanized equipment to remove undergrowth and other forest fuels; there, fires would be suppressed. Forests farther from rural communities would be treated with prescribed fire as well as mechanical thinning to reduce hazardous fuels. In remote forests, managers would use a combination of intentional and natural fire, igniting some under prescribed conditions and allowing lightning-sparked blazes to burn under supervision.

Fighting megafires with more fire is not the oxymoron it might seem. A century of fire suppression has left many forests throughout the West overstocked with trees and crowded with brush. Mechanical thinning can reduce the density but fire restores the natural balance, benefiting a suite of fire-dependent species that rejuvenate the ecosystem.

Federal forest managers understand this and have enacted [policies](#) to promote fire as a management tool. But liability, entrenched economic incentives and public objections to smoke have meant little on-the-ground implementation.

North's three-zoned approach is an opportunity to return fire to the forests where it belongs without the devastating human consequences we have witnessed this year. It comes with some caveats for the public: Along with overcoming our deep-seated fear of fire, intentional burning requires relaxing air-quality regulations and accepting that the smoke from prescribed burns is better planned and timed than out-of-control megafires.

Fire is ever with us in California. The challenge is to accept and better manage it.

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