

Forest disturbance or destruction?

Wildfires continue to rage! This has become the annual fire season theme. Every year millions of acres are burned. Unfortunately many of those acres are burned by catastrophic stand replacing fires. Those fires consume our forests, destroy irreplaceable resources, cause irreparable destruction, and productive forests don't usually come back for decades, or longer. In Plumas County you can see the evidence firsthand, by visiting recent fires including Moonlight, North Antelope, Storrie, Stream, and the list goes on.

As Mother Nature recently demonstrated, fires will continue to occur even if we could prevent every human caused fire. Natural fires have occurred for a very long time due to lightning. What different is the increased fire intensity at which they are burning. Because of attempted fire exclusion, along with land use decisions and some past land management practices. Historically, fire was the key force that thinned, pruned, and cleaned our forests. But it now mostly destroys them.

Our forests are one of our greatest natural resources. Healthy forests provide a variety of resources including clean air, clean water, a renewable energy source (biomass), and lumber to build homes, including rebuilding the hundreds that are lost in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) annually.

As humans, we have the ability, to decide the fate of our forests, by continuing to attempt "protection till convection", or work aggressively to provide "protection from convection". Once a fire is burning in the wildland, the factors which control its behavior are fuel, weather, and topography. The only element humans can manage is fuel. Wildland fuel directly affects fire intensity and consequently the damage to forests, watersheds, and habitats.

Forests like homes can survive the intrusion of wildfire. Not only do professional firefighters and foresters know firsthand that removal of excess surface and ladder fuels and opening up of the canopies is good for forest health, it also reduces fire intensity and spotting. There are an increasing number of studies which validate its importance, including studies of the Angora or Moonlight fires last year (reports are available at www.plumasfiresafe.org).

If we want to affect landscape level fire, we must treat fuels on a landscape level. We can't control where fires start, we can't always control how large they become, but we can strategically manage the intensity at which they burn.

In the end, I believe one has to ask. Are we better off with some forest disturbance or forest destruction?

One thing is certain, if we keep doing what were doing, we're going to keep getting what we got.

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