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**GUEST COLUMN**

# Wallow Fire Reporting Misleading

*Lessons from the largest fire in recent Arizona history*

By George Wuerthner, 6-21-11

The Wallow Fire is now the largest in recent Arizona history, encompassing more than 500,000 acres. The media discussion of the fire often leads to misinformation and misunderstanding of wildfires, and feeds the political agenda of politicians, and industries from developers to the timber industry.

One of the problems of media coverage is that most reporters have little or no training in ecology, much less in-depth understanding of wildfire ecology. Context for large blazes like the Wallow Fire are often missing from reportage. The emphasis on fuels makes for easy reportage, but misses some important nuances that lead to simplistic solutions—the common refrain that if we only logged more of the forest such fires would be prevented.

It also tends to reinforce the idea that thinning is needed in all forest ecosystems, when in fact, many fire regimes in higher elevations and more northern locations are more or less still within historic norms.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to focus on the most unfortunate losses which can exaggerate the perception that such fires have done a lot of "damage" to people, seldom holding people accountable for their own losses because they have chosen to build in a fire-prone landscape.

First, large wildfires do not just happen. Media attention on fuels as the driving force in large blazes like the Wallow Fire misses an important and critical factor—fire climate/weather conditions. You can have all the fuels in the world, but if the conditions are not right for fire spread, you won't get a large blaze.

Climatic/weather conditions are driving the Wallow Fire. The Southwest is experiencing what is described as a 500 year drought. We have not seen such dry conditions in centuries. Is it not surprising that wildfires are larger than in the recent past—when the climatic conditions have no analogy in the recent past?

Contributing to the large blazes are extreme fire weather conditions. Humidity is often 10% or less. Even green trees in the region are drier than kiln-dried lumber. Such green trees still laden with flammable resins and fine fuels in the form of needles and small branches are actually more flammable than dead trees.

The other major ingredient in the Wallow Fire and all large blazes is wind. Every increase in wind is not linear but exponential. A 20 mph wind doesn't just double fire spread over a 10 mph but it can

quadruple spread or more by throwing fire brands and sparks far beyond the fire perimeter. Winds in the Wallow Fire area have gusted to 40-50 mph, fanning rapid fire spread.

Another common reporting problem is the focus on the outer perimeter of the fire. The Wallow Fire has burned an outer perimeter of more than 500,000 acres; however, a significant amount of the land has not burned at all. There are many areas with a nice mosaic of burned and unburned forests.

And fire-fighting efforts themselves also contribute to the large acreage of the fires. Fire fighters, especially under dangerous and severe fire weather, do not attack wildfires head-on. Rather they use fire to fight fire, purposely setting blazes far from the fire front to burn out the fuels, and thus slow fire spread or to keep fires from burning homes and towns.

I do not know how many acres of back fires were set in the Wallow Fire, but in other large blazes across the West, as much as one third of the forest area burned is a direct consequence of fire fighting efforts, thus adding to the large acreage reported. Without acknowledging the contribution of fire fighting to total acres, the public gets an exaggerated view of the fire's severity.

Another factor contributing to the fire's large size and cost is the presence of homes in the Wildlands Interface. Across the West, perhaps the biggest factor contributing to increasing fire-fighting costs and also risk to fire fighters is the irresponsible actions of county commissioners and others who regularly approve home construction in the "fire plain". In far too many instances, rural county commissioners promote home construction in fire-prone landscapes.

The fire plain is like the flood plain of a river. Sooner or later there will be fire in such areas—permitting home construction in such fire-prone landscapes costs all taxpayers who shoulder the costs of fire protection. This is a huge subsidy to these home owners. Ironically, in many cases, those who are demanding that the public pay for fire protection and/or forest thinning projects are the same ones who oppose any reasonable limitations on home construction in fire prone landscapes and frequently complain about excess taxes and government regulation. But they are the first with their hands out when they demand compensation if their homes are burned and are most vocal in their criticism of fire fighters for not protecting their property.

Finally there is the fuel issue. Historically, frequent low intensity fires burned through grassy understory of ponderosa pine forests killing tree seedlings and created open, park-like stands in some areas. It's important to note that even in the past, not all ponderosa pine stands were "park-like", nor were all blazes necessarily low intensity. Under extreme climatic conditions, large blazes did occur. So whether a fire like the Wallow Fire is really out of the historic norm depends on the spatial and temporal scale one is considering. A 500 year drought is not the recent historic condition. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that human activities have exacerbated the present conditions that have led to a greater abundance of dense forest stands.

There is general agreement that many ponderosa pine forests in the Southwest exceed historic tree densities. However, the ponderosa pine forests burned by the Wallow Fire are not hugely out of historic range of viability compared to other parts of Arizona. Eastern Arizona contains the largest percentages of mature/old growth ponderosa pine.

Furthermore, some of the higher elevation areas are cloaked in spruce and fir forests which tend to burn in stand replacement blazes and are well within historic conditions.

Thinning forests to reduce forest density can sometimes work to reduce the intensity of blazes and slow the spread of fires. However, we should recognize that we are treating the symptoms, instead of the ultimate cause of changes in forest density and composition.

One of the most important factors has been livestock grazing. Grazing has eliminated the fine fuels or grass cover that once dominated the forest floor in many low elevation forest types across the Southwest. These grasses regularly burned killing tree seedlings.

Trampling by hooves has disrupted soil crusts which in the past helped to reduce soil erosion, the loss of moisture, added nutrients to the soils, and prevented germination of annual species like cheatgrass.

The loss of grass cover and soil crusts by livestock grazing has also reduced the competition for water by tree seedlings, creating more favorable germination and growth condition for trees.

Despite the well known effects of grazing on fire regimes in this landscape, federal and state agencies allow livestock grazing to continue, contributing to the exact same conditions that have led to the dense tree stands.

Adding to the problem has been past logging of old growth pine. Large pines with their thick bark and self pruning loss of lower branches were more resistant to fires and less likely to “crown” out as blazes running through the tree tops. Loss of the larger pines has permitted many smaller trees to survive on the sites, leading to denser forest stands. However, the forest area burned by the Wallow Fire is probably closer to historic conditions than areas nearer Flagstaff where large mills eliminated nearly all the old growth forests.

Compounding the effects that grazing and logging has had on forests, is the on-going policy of fire exclusion. Despite the well known influence of wildfire on thinning ponderosa pine forests, public agencies seldom permit wildfires to burn unimpeded. The good thing about the Wallow and other large blazes is that it is resetting the forest landscape, removing dense tree stands. However, if agencies like the Forest Service continue to suppress fires, and allow livestock grazing, it will ultimately lead to the same dense tree conditions again.

Livestock grazing along with logging and road building has allow exotic weeds to spread throughout these forests. Many of these exotic species are more flammable than the native species they have replaced.

Thinning forests as proposed as a “cure” to the present forest situation may contribute more flammable forests in the future, especially if the on-going activities including livestock grazing, fire suppression, ORV use, and logging continue.

Those who are looking for simplistic answers often support thinning of these forests as a panacea for large blazes. Thinning near towns can contribute to more effective protection of communities. By reducing fuels near towns, one can deflect, slow, and sometimes even stop blazes. But that assumes that you can focus a lot of fire fighting man-power on the fire lines near communities.

However, widespread thinning, especially if it involves removal of larger trees, is not benign and the consequences of logging may be worse for forest ecosystems than anything that results from a large

blaze. For instance, if logging requires new roads, it greatly increases the negative effects. Roads create access for people for hunting, trapping, and reduce the security cover for wildlife. Logging roads are also a major source of sedimentation in streams. There is sedimentation after a fire as well, but in most areas, sedimentation levels return to pre-fire levels within a few years, while roads "leak" sediments for decades. Logging can remove biomass from the forest, reducing the future occurrence of rotten logs and snags that are important to many wildlife species. As previously mentioned, disturbance of soils by logging equipment and road building can spread exotic weeds. Unless all these negative impacts are considered in thinning plans, one can't determine whether logging will have a positive overall influence upon forest ecosystems or perhaps negative.

*George Wuerthner's New West blog is "On the Range."*

**[End of article]**

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**Comment By Fotoware, 6-21-11**

No mention of the "bloom" of bark beetles that will kill off the trees that survived the wildfire?!? The weakened survivors on "life support" will serve as "brood trees" for clouds of bark beetles. Salvaging some of the dead and dying trees could reduce the coming bark beetle explosion. Alas, I don't see any chance that the CBD will allow such a thing to happen. Preserving the damages under some Hippocratic forest oath will lock out any fuels reduction projects leading to rehabilitation. Just as large parts of the Biscuit Fire re-burned with excessive fire intensity, the Wallow Fire mortality is far from over with, inside the Wallow Firestorm. Pretending that this fire is "natural and beneficial" ignores scientific facts. The "mosaic" you see today will be radically-different than in 5 years, 10 years and further into the future. The idea that this fire reduced the unnatural dead fuels buildups is incorrect. The unsalvaged mortality will fuel the next firestorm, which will continue to damage watersheds, ESA habitats, old growth and the rest of the forest features we depend on for clean water and clean air.

When will the nightmare of "passive restoration" end?!?!? It seems that the eco-community is deathly afraid of actions to reduce wildfires ignitions, spread and intensities. They are also afraid of "traitors" who come to realize that preservation doesn't lead to "protection".

**Comment By Dave Skinner, 6-21-11**

Wow, just shameless, George.
No matter how much you write, all it's going to take is one mortality map, or one picture, to blow your rhetoric away.
I'll ditto Foto on the bugs. Saw that happen on the East Fork as the bugs flew down from the burn area, turned the whole canyon red within two years, was it?
Never mind how the bugs from Diamond Park blowdown went nuts leading to conditions for that big burn across the Zirkels into the North Park.

**Comment By George Wuerthner, 6-21-11**

Fotoware

I am not interested in protecting forests from bugs or fires. That's like trying to protect a river from

floods or coastal areas from hurricanes.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-21-11**

Or, apparently, catastrophic erosion, burned homes, endangered wildlife, jobs, recreation sites, archaeological sites, old growth, etc, etc, etc. If this were 1803, we could use your mindset but, the landscapes are so very, very far from the conditions of 1803. You seem to be saying that today's wildfires and bark beetle attacks are "natural and beneficial", and should be welcomed into our forests. That arson fires and escaped campfires produce results you support. That it is OK to "re-set" old growth forests via whatever burn intensity we end up with.

That mindset is definitely rejected by most Americans today, preferring big green trees, rich wildlife inventories and undying landscapes. It has been proven that active forest management is better at restoration than doing nothing, especially in the case of crowded and unhealthy ponderosa pine forests. Sure, go ahead and "preserve" dead Wilderness forests of pure lodgepole.

**Comment By JJ86, 6-21-11**

Great article George!

**Comment By Juan Carlos Reyes, 6-21-11**

Hi [a] Thanks a lot for share this

<a >recuperacion de datos</a>

**Comment By Justin Boggs, 6-21-11**

It is difficult to imagine a way to write a more rhetorically biased article about fires.

**Comment By Darren, 6-21-11**

The main thrust of the story, that the media reporting Is misleading is absolutely correct. The bIased or uninformed reporting leads to further misinformed policies. The blame goes all around, but George makes some very accurate points here that are completely ignored by the media and policymakers. And further shunned by those unwilling to accept responsibility or the truth. If only we have a real conversation and find the points of agreement instead of disagreement, maybe we'd actually get some where.

**Comment By George Wuerthner, 6-21-11**

Fotoware

The mind set that humans know how to fix things is how we got into the current predicament.

The dense stands of ponderosa pine are a consequence of previous management activities including livestock grazing, logging, and fire suppression. All of these activities are on-going. We will never

get out of this predicament by doing the same old things over and over.

The first step in intelligent tinkering is to stop doing what caused the problem. If you have a headache from hitting yourself with a hammer, a smart first step is to stop pounding yourself with the hammer. Then we can talk about where to go from there.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-21-11**

I think the Indians did just fine in shaping their environment for their own prosperity and benefit. Actually, Indians were in much the same predicament, with big wildfires burning their camps and hunting grounds down, and killing tribe members.

So, we should block the future because we blame the past? Just how much logging went on last year in the Wallow Firestorm area?!? How many lumber mills are even left in Arizona?!? I place my trust in Dr. Stephen Pyne, who advocates the right treatments for the right pieces of land. His enlightened comments on the Wallow Fire say that it didn't have to burn. The narrow-minded thought that doing nothing will fix our forests is ludicrous. I'm not saying that we should go back to the last millennium's mistakes but, I AM saying that we cannot preserve away these unnatural forests without massive impacts to our human existence. It's all too easy to blame the past without any valid solutions of your own.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-21-11**

Indians learned that managing their forests was essential to their very survival. Could the same be said for us?!?

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-22-11**

http://ncfp.wordpress.com/2011/06/22/fires-bolster-political-support-for-forest-thinning-from-payson-roundup/

Including an ACTUAL picture of thinned stands that survived the Wallow Firestorm. We can ignore the forest conditions you talk about, George, and let more Wallow Firestorms burn. Or, we can work to reduce the fuels that turn lightning strikes, arson fires and escaped campfires into the more than $200,000,000 disasters you seem to embrace. We have spent close to $500,000,000 according to NIFC this year. Fire totals are over 7 million acres this year, far ahead of the modern record pace. However, it is less about sheer acreage than it is about fire intensity.

**Comment By George Wuerthner, 6-22-11**

Fotoware

There are three things wrong with your assumptions.

The first is that it would be impossible to thin the entire forest--or even a significant amount of it. The FS is doing the best it can do under the circumstances, which is to thin around communities so they can be defended.

Keep in mind that thinning is not a "one time" thing--especially as long as we continue to suppress fires, allow livestock grazing, etc. Trees grow back--and within 10-15 years in many areas--and the resulting forests will have a high stocking rate of young trees--providing the small fuels that allow fires to run through the woods. Long before you can thin an entire forest, you need to go back and thin the areas you first thinned. And the costs mount with each repetition. One has to be strategic about thinning since it's impossible to treat an entire forest.

Second, even with thinning, fires burn through the forest. In fact, there is no scientific agreement about the effectiveness of thinning. Of course, there are all kinds of prescriptions on thinning and differences in age since the last time a forest was thinned, etc. that makes comparisons difficult.

Nevertheless, in some places, under some circumstances, thinning does appear to do what proponents suggest--it appears to slow fires. However there are plenty of places where fires just blast right through thinned forests--and in some fires even seem to burn with greater intensity.

For instance, on the Biscuit Fire in Oregon (Oregon's biggest fire) thinned forest and previously logged forests had the highest mortality. Thinning can sometimes actually increase fire spread because it opens the forest to greater wind penetration, and drying of the fuels.

You are not thinking about the extraordinary weather/climate circumstances that are causing these large fires. While it's possible to defend a targeted area like the edge of a community with a lot of fire fighting equipment, etc. it is impossible to stop a fire when the wind, humidity and drought are combined. That's a fallacy. The best you can do is deflect the fire.

Third, as long as governments allow people to continue building in the fire plain, the situation will only get worse. The high costs of suppression are primarily due to the increasing costs of defending buildings in the hinterlands. Unless county commissioners, state agencies, etc. start to restrict construction in such areas and/or start to require insurance to pay for fire protection much as flood insurance is a requirement for those living in flood plains, than the rest of us are paying for the poor decisions of those who want to live out in the woods.

You want to talk about high costs of suppression, start complaining to county commissioners who are allowing people to build in the fire plain and expect the rest of us to pay for their fire protection costs, including thinning the forest.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-22-11**

The ESA says that we MUST defend Endangered Species Habitat. Whether the danger comes from logging, or wildfire, we cannot afford to lose any more habitat. Without habitat, many listed species cannot survive. No one is saying that all lands would be thinned. Lovely strawman! If the Forest Service was "doing the best it can", why would they be pushing for a new Planning Rule that could be a game-changer? Yes, they face a steep uphill battle to get projects implemented on the ground but, Indians also expended much effort to manage their lands, as well.

In many areas, projects could, indeed, be a "one time thing". After an initial reduction of live and dead fuels, prescribed and "natural" fire can do the rest, both ecologically AND economically well. When we get to that sustainable state, yes we CAN treat significant areas of our forests.

With site-specific science, we can choose one of many tools in a forester's toolbox to reach the desired conditions. And, yes, one tool is to just let the land be, if that is what the science says. When there are too many trees per acre for the annual precipitation, densities MUST be reduced. Where species compositions are out of balance with the historical baseline, we can selectively thin to get more balance. Fuels reduction projects also reduce fire intensities, as you can see in the Wallow Firestorm picture released by the Forest Service.

I worked for 3 weeks on the Biscuit Fire salvage sales, and I saw some stands that were unlogged old growth with 99% mortality. Also contributing heavily to the extreme fire behavior on the Biscuit is the unsalvaged portion of the 1987 Silver Fire. Re-burns are significant dangers, causing longterm soils damage and accelerated erosion, due to heavy fuels close to the ground. Also impacting the Biscuit Fire is an increase in post-fire bark beetle mortality. They chose to cut only completely dead trees, and leaving the trees dying (but not dead yet) from bark beetles. I saw a photo of a cutting unit I worked in and was amazed at how many more trees died since I was there. The bark beetles didn't stop at the USFS property line, either. The fireline was very close to the property line, and the private land was riddled with bug trees.

Thinning stands back to historical densities and species compositions should offer no problem with increased fire behavior. Where I live, unthinned forests have structurally-weakened trees in them, due to less wind. This last heavy winter has resulted in a bumper crop of broken-topped trees over a very wide area.

The Biscuit Fire was "caused" by letting a lightning strike burn. With so many human-caused fires, why preserved overstocked and unhealthy forests? Do we select which kinds of fires get to burn unimpeded? There is a tiny window of decision, when a wildfire is small, to decide whether to let a fire burn, or to go with full suppression. The Feds have their "Let-Burn" program, which doesn't follow required NEPA. This program is turning $3000 lightning fires into $50,000,000 fire storms. In Utah, they let a fire burn for weeks, until the winds came up and the escaped fire covered 12 miles to the doorstep of New Harmony. Take a look at the fire costs for individual fires this year. Blaming people for where they live is ridiculous. Many people have lived in the woods for decades. I have Forest Service land right across the street from me, and it could use a prescribed fire. Sadly, from a liability point of view, the Forest Service would rather let fires burn during hot and dry conditions, rather than lighting a prescribed fire. Private landowners can sue if a prescribed fire gets away. If a Let-Burn fire gets away, landowners are screwed, and have no recourse in court.

I do agree with you that zoning has to be smarter. However, you cannot tell an existing resident to move. In the example of Lake Tahoe's Angora Fire, the Forest Service didn't do enough to protect a long-existing subdivision next to unhealthy Forest Service lands. The brushlands of the LA Basin are a good example of where not to allow homes, unless you want to provide your own fire protection.

It's all about appropriate action, and I feel that important parts of our existing forests are worth saving from catastrophic wildfires. You seem to believe differently.

**Comment By George Wuerthner, 6-22-11**

Fotoware

Thinning if it is kept up and is used to buffer places like communities and other important areas can work--at least with a lot of fire fighting power behind them. That is strategic use of thinning.

But timing of thinning (when was the last time it was thinned and subsequent treatment--has there been follow up prescribed burns) greatly influences the effectiveness of these treatments as I suspect you know.

If you just finished thinning and burned the area just prior to the fire, you get a lot more effective results. But we are not going to ever have the money nor the resources to treat all the forests. And I am not trying to make a strawman here. Many do advocate treating millions of acres, and as I pointed out, by the time you finish treating one area of a forest, you need to go back and repeat the treatments, and the job multiples.

Plus there are a lot of negatives that come with logging. I might wager, for instance, that introduction of weeds by logging equipment may well have far greater repercussions for forest ecosystems than if they burn up in a fire. And weed introduction is only one of many typically ignored or downplayed costs often associated with thinning operations. Sure one can point to places that have burned and where there are weeds as well, especially if there are livestock in the area, but in general, the more human activity the greater the chance of weed invasion.

Weeds are only one of many negatives associated with thinning operations.

Furthermore, I think thinning advocates are exaggerating the effectiveness of such activities, especially under severe fire conditions.Sure thinning may stop or slow a fire under "normal" weather conditions. But under "normal" weather conditions, you don't get 500,000 acre fires.

I have seen many thinned forest stands, even clearcuts, that were cooked in fires under severe fire conditions. And since these large fires are the only fires we are typically worried about it, it is an important question. And it's a question that is difficult to study scientifically.

Thinning may also be dangerous in that it may foster even more construction in the rural landscape because it could give people a false sense of security.

By analogy thinning may be like the levees that burst in New Orleans. Those levees had held back floods for decades. So everyone assumed they worked. But there was never a direct hit by a category five hurricane until Katrina. Then we discovered that the levees didn't work. Many thinning operations are like that. They may work under "normal" conditions. But put the ecological equivalent of a category five hurricane (big wildfire) and many of these thinning projects fail.

Who is going to set a fire in controlled plots with a 500 year drought, 50 mph wind, and 10% humidity to see whether the thinned plots fared better than the unthinned stands. The best we can do is visit and look at fires that have occurred and see how they have burned through lands that for one reason or another were previously treated. Assuming that all other factors are equal like topography, wind, and so on. When you do that, you find many failures in thinning projects to stop or even slow fires.

The response one gets from thinning proponents is that we just need to thin more. But it's reasonable to ask whether there will ever be enough thinning to really be effective--under those severe fire conditions.

There is also a sense I get from many that somehow eliminating these large fires is desirable. I am not so sure we would want to do that. The vast majority of all acreage in any single year is a result of few large fires. If you remove the large fires, you get very little fire "work" being performed. Most fires do not burn very much land. It is the large fires--the ones that everyone wants to eliminate--that does all the work.

If as many agree that wildfires are critical to many ecosystems. Many things occur in the severe fires that does not occur in the moderate fires.

As for homes in the woods, sure we can try to protect some of those homes, but maybe it's time to say to folks, you build in the woods, you need to get insurance. And we surely should not allow them to rebuild in such places.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-22-11**

I think people have enough information to decide whether to follow George, and push for doing nothing, or to follow Dr. Stephen Pyne (THE most respected wildfire scientist), and use science and sociology to decide what to do with a particular piece of land. Congress will do what is right for their individual constituencies, unless they vote the strict party lines. The new Planning Rule should be coming out this fall, and we will see if America is progressive enough to accept New Millennium treatments, or whether to fall back on the 1982 Rule, yet again. Also important to decide is whether to continue to give firefighters control over a flawed, destructive, expensive and illegal Let-Burn program. Their on-the-fly analyses do not meet NEPA or ESA laws, and continue to shut out stakeholders.

Will the Wallow Firestorm be a giant legacy to our offspring? How severe will the floods and erosion be, when the monsoon comes? When will evacuated communities be allowed to return home? Many, many more questions need answers and our government doesn't have many answers, right now. In the meantime, it is "Burn, Baby, Burn"!!!

**Comment By the real mike, 6-22-11**

Footwear, the last time I checked Steve Pyne actually seemed to be advocating thinning, in the form of mechanical timber harvest, only to the extent required to get unnaturally overgrown areas back to a state close enough to natural to enable natural fire regimes to resume control. Under any other circumstances, Steve has always seemed, to me, to be advocating natural fire regimes as the preferred means of maintaining forest health. Yes, being on a public faculty, tenured or not, in a state like Arizona can't help but affect his ability to be bluntly candid and probably curtails his eagerness to publicly respond to misperceptions spread about his positions; but, I don't recall him being an advocate of continual intensive harvest, certainly not anything like the kind of industrial exploitation that your comments routinely, either overtly or covertly, support. In this sense, your use of Pyne as a justification for your own continuous advocacy of industrial-strength "cut the forest to save the forest" exploitation seems inappropriate.

Look, Steve is still very much alive, still has a very vigorous and active mind, and has computers, with web connections, in his office and at home. If you are so certain of your positions that you feel no hesitation about speaking for a living authority on his own topic of expertise, then why not contact Steve and see whether he might be willing to post his own comments endorsing you as his spokesman and supporting your positions? Please, contact Steve; we would all like to see Steve write a quick column here in which he speaks for himself, supporting you and the wisdom of your continuous, cyclical, industrial harvest mindset.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-22-11**

Hey, why not read his OWN WORDS!?! I very much agree with his take on the Wallow Firestorm.

http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/viewpoints/articles/2011/06/11/20110611pyne-wallow-fire-monster.html

Nowhere did I advocate continuous harvesting, and nowhere have I pushed for using thinning in every nook and cranny on every Forest. Over and over I keep saying that site-specific science and rural sociology (as in fire safety for towns) should decide what to do with a particular piece of Federal land. Once forests are restored to more natural conditions and fuels loadings, it might be a long time before there is another timber sale there. Nothing about "continuous, cyclical, industrial harvest".

Read the piece and tell me what you think. I am 100% behind Pyne's commentary.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-22-11**

Also of interest in that article is the comments. Already, it seems, the Wallow Firestorm has become a political football, even before it has stopped burning. We'll soon see Phase 2 of this disaster when the monsoon rains come and cannot penetrate the "melted" hydrophobic soils, channeling it into a destructive, erosive force. Yep, didn't you know that fires and floods often go hand-in-hand?

**Comment By Smokey the Bear, 6-24-11**

George, you're a moron.

**Comment By Dave Skinner, 6-24-11**

And so much for this year's crop of Mexican spotted owls or other young of the year.
But that's "good" because it makes the owl more endangered and longer to recovery, if ever.
Now we are looking at flooding come monsoon season. That should be a pretty time.
The Wallow is an environmental disaster of epic proportions, thanks in large part to lack of prescriptive management. Sure, the whole thing might not have been fireproofed, but forestry belts and routine management over time (which George opposes) would manage fuels and preserve the vegetative attributes that create habitat. Managing break belts with fiscally-self-supporting timber harvest and processing operations would without a doubt have broken up a 700,000 acre fire into what, 50,000 acres?
I don't know how many times I've seen the results of a crown fire running up into a managed unit

and either stopping or at least hitting the ground for a beneficial underburn.

**Comment By George Wuerthner, 6-24-11**

Dave:

It's one of those he said, she said kinds of things, but as many crown fires that you have seen run into a managed unit and stop, I've seen many that failed to stop or slow fires--under extraordinary circumstances that spawn the big fires.

Again we have to qualify the circumstances. Were the conditions extreme? Was the wind blowing? What was the humidity? What were the dominate species and age of trees are we discussing? What was the topography? What was the previous history of the area--when was the last major fire?

All those things affect what we see.

I'm sure that you log enough forests, over enough area you can make a big difference in fire spread--but is this really the only concern? Or are we going to also determine how many acres are allowed to burn under prescribed conditions--which never burn enough because we never do them except under conditions when fires are not likely to spread.

If wildfires have a beneficial role to play, and many ecologists at least suggest they do, than we need to accept that sometimes there will be large blazes because that is the only way you are going to influence enough acres to be effectiveness in terms of ecological function.

It is not unlike flooding on rivers. If we control rivers so they don't flood, than we lose any benefits that are associated with flooding, including regeneration of riparian species like cottonwood, etc. And it is the occasional and very rare large floods that do the majority of work on rivers.

**Comment By bearbait, 6-24-11**

Old and tired of the BS, I really don't care if the public forest all burns. But fire does not work that way. So these public land forest and range fires have a way to consume private land resources, and the land owner has no viable recourse for his or her loss. ON the other disingenuous hand, US Attorney General Holder has three teams of US Attorneys whose sole job it is to find and prosecute for the US every property owner or actionable person whose fire trespassed on the Federal Estate, and go for damages. All that land that burns in roadless, wilderness, matrix lands each year has no value assigned to lost public resources. The Feds don't keep score of the timber lost, opportunity lost, investments and assets lost. But they sure as hell can count them when they think they can gain damages in civil court, damages that the private side cannot gain in suing the Feds for a like act. The two big ones I have read about are the UnionPacificRR paying $102,000,000 for a fire in the Feather River canyon caused by a rail repair spark that quickly got out of hand. Add that the section gang was Hispanic, and the US Attorneys were easily able to get 5 different accounts of what happened by the 5 guys on the crew. Guilty!!! For the same damages against the Feds, they have the tort limit of $300,000 which is not enough to even pay the lawyers to pursue it. Pacific Gas and Electric got nailed for $12,000,000 for a fire on the easement they maintain on public lands for a powerline that a rotten Ppine fell on and sparked a fire. All you econazis can now rest assured that every tree showing decay along a powerline right of way will be felled and a whole lot that are

minimally marginal will fall too.

The Obama Admin is adversarial, and the private side has its hands full. Why the left deems it right to continue to regulate and rule is beyond me. Here we are, up to our collective ass in a piss poor economy, and 50 legislatures and one Congress are writing up new bills daily, and the Feds are shoving more regulations and administrative rules our way daily. Folks!!! You are not going to create jobs that way. Sorry. And fighting huge wildfires because you have not done one whit of fuels management in three decades is reality. Weather can't burn dick. E. Brush.....And drought does not stop vegetation from growing. Trees grow or die. There is no backsliding. It is death or more wood every year. Fuels build up, accumulate, grow, and that is what is burning. Not weather. Not wind. Fuels. Fuels are what burns. I have pictures of a red retardant line across a sage flat from road to rimrock..the fire stopped there. One side is black and the other sage green. A red line separates them. I have pictures of how a fire burned against the wind to find fuel to run before the wind once more. It ran into a 10 year old plantation of lodgepole pine and zigged to find the zag of fuels. I have somewhere, pictures of where a crown fire fell to ground when it entered a kind of leave tree deal where "thinning" left less than a dozen leave trees per acre. "Shelterwood" is what they called those. A clear cut in practical sense, but with a lot of leave trees for seeding and wildlife. Removing fuel by retardant use, fire line, water, cat trails, thinning, clear cuts, all works to stop fires. Not all fires. but most fires. You do something to mediate the potential for fire to take all that you have. Indians did just that for millennia. That brain finds a way to not have fire destroy all that you need for survival. Then and now. Unless, of course, you are working in public land management, in a country that is now over 95% urban, and every urban voter is an expert on land management: do nothing.

And "do nothing" appears to be the mantra of our society. We no longer do much. And the longer we don't do much, the less we can do. That is true for manufacturing, and it is true for land management. The USFS lost the institutional memory, the know how, and the people who had the "know how." So as we patiently wait for them to reinvent the wheel, and for the George's of the world to batter them with faux science, we get the American result: nothing. We do nothing, produce nothing, and according to the economists and financial wizards, we are in for at least another decade of job loss and no growth. We are Greece!!!! And where in Europe are the most wildland fires?? In Greece!!! More of that country has burned in the last decade than any other in Europe. Russia is not Europe. Or Yurp in South Dakota.

The fuel will burn. yesterday. now. tomorrow. But only a few days of the year, really. But weather is here 24/7/12/365. WE still have weather and no fires.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-25-11**

Be sure to read about the Endangered Species impacted or outright killed by this wildfire. I found the link to this article on a Democratic website, and out of all the angst and "concern for all living things", not one Democratic poster had anything to say about this tragedy. However, on the Yahoo site, there is nearly 1400 comments. I guess the Democrats are also blaming rare animals for living where they live, as well, just like they blame homeowners who lost their homes. This seems a lot like how pioneers were burned out of their homes, except it is urban folks who are wielding the metaphorical driptorches. What is next? Enforced mandatory relocation, ala American Indians?!?

One could also say that cholera is "natural and beneficial", leading to less people and impacts upon the land. The idea that man is a cancer upon the earth should be applied to urban areas first, if that's the way you want to play it.

Of course, George, your ideas DO apply for some parts of our forests. When pure lodgepole forests burn, way up in Wilderness Areas, it's not worthwhile to bring in dozers, airtankers and handcrews. But you seem to advocate the end of "strategic" firefighting, to save human improvements and wildlife habitat, alike. Eco-groups feel that just a tree length is adequate for fire safety, regardless of forest type, density or condition. We've seen this recipe for disaster over and over and over. Sad that wildfire freedom trumps human safety.

**Comment By Fotoware, 6-25-11**

Oops, here's the link:

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110624/ap_on_sc/us_western_wildfires

**Comment By logger, 6-25-11**

Oh but it was quite possible to "thin all the forest" before the CBD shut it down. The Apache-sitgrieves used to routinely "commercially thin" 20,000 acres a year.

Todd Shulke, of the radical enviro group Center for Biological diversity(CBD), has himself just endorsed and praised the postive effects on fire severity that "thinning" had on the fire behavior. The thinning was done under the "white mountain stewardship program", which his group has supported and endorsed. It has "thinned" 35,000 acres in the last 6 years. What do you think of his opinion George?

Unfortunately, the CBD shut down the timber industry in 1995. So that means Todd is responsible for 300,000 acres that DID NOT recieve the very thinning treatments he has just endorsed as effective(out of 800,000 acres of "conifer forest). I hope Todd baby is sitting alone in a dark room, late at night, big drink in hand, staring into the abyss, and has realized with horror that he is responsible for burning up 250,000 acres. We can't lie to ourselves for long. Big men leave big consequences behind them. Perhaps Todd will someday say "we were wrong, terribly wrong". That'll be the day.

So tell me George, Do you support the CBD's endorsement of thinning 50,000 acres/year in Arizona? Or are you more radical than the radical CBD. If it's good enough for Arizona, then why isn't it good enough for Montana?

Have you ever heard of the 1910 Woolsey inventory and how it compares to todays forest density? In 1910 there were only 13 trees/acre over 13". Today, after a hundred years of industrial logging, there is twice that many. There's also the same amount of "big trees". You did know that the "best available" science says that there were only 15-25 trees/acre (woolsey inventory-Covington et al). That's a tree every 50 feet. hell, that's called a "shelterwood seed cut" now. A shelterwood is slightly less than a clearcut. The Kootenai is full pof them after clearcutting was practically banned. Will you call for intensive logging to "restore" the forest to that density?? Can you handle the truth of the pre-settlement forest?

I always love the blah blah blah about "they logged all the big trees that were fireproof" (of course the woolsey inventory says there are still big trees). How can this be? You see, the 24" tree today was just a 12" tree a hundred years ago. And now there's tons of 12" trees that are a hundred years old.

I always love the blather about 100 years of fire suppresiion. As in "before white man come low intensity fires burned every ten years to this the forest". Which is true-but are you suggesting an alternative historical ending where man "wouldn't" have cut down those big trees and would have allowed fires to keep burning? Will you state here yes or no? I always love the utopian musings of enviro's where hate was just a legend and war was never known.

How would you support your lavish baby boomer lifestyle. Get the lumber from Canada. I would imagine most of the historic district in Flagstaff is built from "old growth" timber. The boomers use twice the per capita electricty and their homes have twice the sqaure foot as their fathers generation. I guess all the old hippies grew up to be Republicans.

It's gonna be a joy spending the next five years watching the radical enviro establishment crash and literally burn.

**Comment By Justin Boggs, 6-25-11**

Logger

I feel you bro, but simmer down. You are going to burst something.

**Comment By Dave Skinner, 6-29-11**

Actually, JB,
Blowing off steam is a good way to avoid a pop.
Nice riff, Logs.

**Comment By bearbait, 6-29-11**

I see the fire events in the desert southwest are closing in on the nuke dump at Los Alamos. I thought there would not be a lot left to burn there, since they tried not too many years ago to burn the town with a set fire in a poorly managed attempt to reduce fuels by the Feds.

The issue with public land management is that the Feds will manage it like their wars, their social welfare programs, their boondoggle public public works contracting, FEMA responses, K-12 education, and I could go on and on. We really should not expect anything out of their management, and therefore should not be disappointed or concerned with the outcomes.

I watched flooding, for the last year in these United States, raise hell with people all over the country. When you lose your home to a flood, no matter where or why, you lose your home and are devastated. Evidently, only in New Orleans or the Gulf Coast is worth hand wringing and national despair and indictment of Federal programs and interventions, and Republican flogging. Let it happen during a Democrat administration and nothing is reported about the poor people who lose it

all. I don't see the outpouring of sympathy and concern for those hundreds of thousands of hard working residents of small rural towns and farms that have suffered in the floods this year, floods from too much winter snow and the responding snow melt with thunder storms on top of that water. Is it that middle class people not of color need to suffer damage to "make it right", or is it assumed middle class and poor white people have the means to build new lives without Federal assistance?? Whatever, the number and scope of disasters with weather this year have been biblical. And all a result of either a cold, wet winter, or the cold air from the Pacific coast colliding with the warm air of the Gulf. But it has been cold that has driven the process. Warmer and hotter mean little until colliding with cold and colder. And the monsoon will come to the desert Southwest, and the thunder storms will move north and west, and the fires will burn in other areas where the Feds have allowed fuels to build.

Today, the Feds announced their spotted owl plan to mitigate owl habitat losses caused by unfought fires destroying tens of millions of acres of owl habitat by declaring they will hold private land to higher standards of directed Federally mandated benign neglect. When the current path is not working out, just include more people and land in the equation and keep on doing the same thing. Best science. Oh, and a directed, intense, Federal extirpation of competing Barred Owls. Yep. Eugenics. Euthanasia. Holocaust for Barred Owls by official USFWS and US Govt decree. The Obama Government has become National Lampoon Liberal Administration and Animal House, all in one convenient package. The urbane version of Hee-Haw. Where is Mort Sahl when you need him?? Dennis Miller? Is the announced intent for barred owl genocide just a training session, as it were, for bigger and better things down the road?? Are Iowa Lutheran sunday school teachers on a list? People with the star and bars on the pickem up license holder going to be targeted? When a liberal Democrat elected and supported by people who don't want "under God" in the pledge of allegiance, signs off on killing one species of owl to protect another, all the while believing wolves should be able to eat cattle with impunity, you do wonder when they will round up for extirpation the Hells Angels or Dykes on Bikes. Liberals eliminate God from the lexicon, and then take on the role for themselves. Nice.

We live in interesting times. For a while longer, at least.