

FOREST NEWS



The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics


Summer 2022

Prescribed FIRE



Inside

FOREST CLOSURE VICTORY / GUEST AUTHOR: TIMBER THIEVES /
BEAVERS AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE / OREGON WILDFIRE STUDY / GINSENG



After a prescribed fire escaped within hours of its ignition, burning 350,000 acres of a New Mexico mountain range and incinerating 900 buildings, can Smokey Bear ever again be trusted to play with matches? That's the question Forest Service Chief Randy Moore hopes to answer during a 90-day prescribed burning "pause" he ordered.

Chief Moore blamed the Hermit's Peak debacle on "climate change" for creating "conditions on the ground we have never encountered" — as if drought and high winds are novel natural phenomena. The decision to light a prescribed fire is based on local weather, not global climate. Blaming "climate change" deflects responsibility from his own agency, which, he asserts, followed "all procedures and policies." Tone deaf would be a generous characterization of the Chief's remarks.

There is one thing the Chief gets right. Fire in the western U.S. is inevitable. Seasonally dry vegetation, low humidity, and high winds create an uncontrollably combustible mix. During decades when the Pacific Ocean delivers cold currents to the West Coast, increased moisture levels make fires easier to control, like my notoriously rainy Oregon home from the '50s to the '80s. Western forests were not very flammable during those wet decades. Nonetheless, we old firefighters patted ourselves on the backs for our prowess.

With the onset of multi-year droughts, Western fires have proven remarkably stubborn to suppress. This is not a new story. The 1930s "Dust Bowl" drought saw a similar dramatic

uptick in wildfire acres. Ecological studies of lakebed sediments, which map fires by ash deposits, tell the same cyclical story going back thousands of years. The Forest Service can't change that.

What the Forest Service can do is be honest and change its own behavior. If agency "procedures and policies" were followed, then the Chief needs to state forthrightly that those procedures and policies are wrong and change them. Three Mile Island taught that organizational and management factors are the main causes of failure in complex systems. Natural ecosystems are far more complex than nuclear reactors.

The Chief should focus his "pause" on understanding the organizational structure and behavior that led to this unacceptable tragedy and stop with the climate blame game. To that end, I suggest the Chief eliminate annual acres-treated targets. Timber targets have been bad for our national forests; prescribed burning targets are no better. Natural systems are not governed by annual budgets.

Chief Moore also needs to flip fire policy on its head. The summer monsoon is the best season for prescribed burning in New Mexico, not drought-prone, windblown spring. But the Forest Service reserves summer months for firefighting. Employees who could be managing summer burns are expected to fight fires elsewhere instead.

If we are serious about using prescribed burning to make our forests more resilient to wildfire (and our firefighting job easier in the long run), then prescribed burning should be prioritized over fire suppression.

Sincerely,



Andy Stahl

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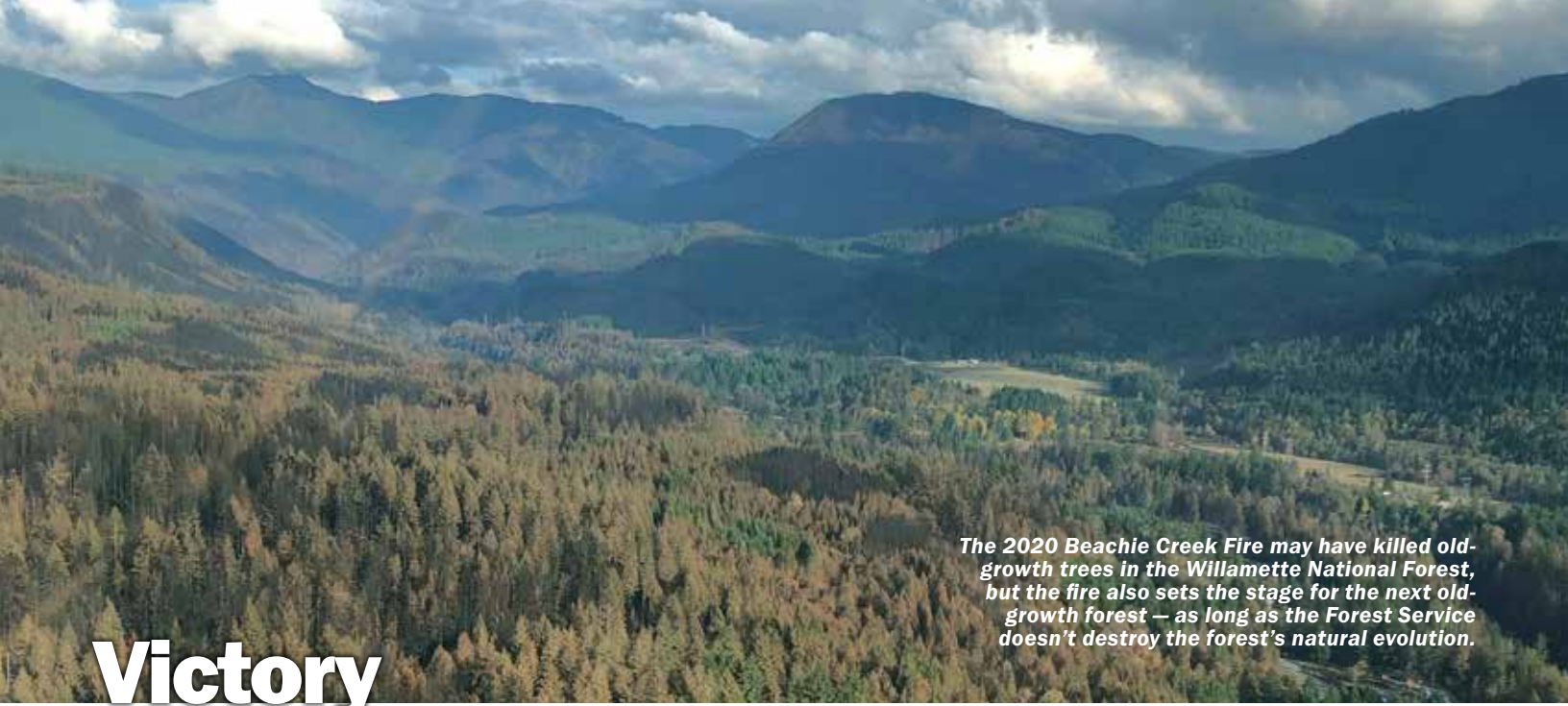
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Oregon Fires and Forest Management



The 2020 Beachie Creek Fire may have killed old-growth trees in the Willamette National Forest, but the fire also sets the stage for the next old-growth forest — as long as the Forest Service doesn't destroy the forest's natural evolution.

Victory

Post-fire Forests Reopening

During the 2020 and 2021 fires in Oregon national forests, the Forest Service issued closure orders in the affected areas. But once the fires were extinguished, closure orders were extended, ostensibly to protect the public from the risks posed by so-called “danger trees.”

Using the excuse of public safety, Willamette leadership attempted to implement an aggressive logging plan. FSEEE told the Forest Service the plan was illegal, and Dr. Travis Heggie, former public risk management specialist for the National Park Service, explained that the odds of anyone being underneath a backcountry tree at the precise moment it falls are inconsequential.

Judge Michael McShane agreed, and our victory saved thousands of acres of critical wildlife habitat as well as the fertile ground that will nourish the next generation of old-growth forest. But the court ruling did not fully resolve the Forest Service closure orders.

The response from Pacific Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa completes our victory. Casamassa has issued a new directive that reads, “Restoring access is a high priority for the Forest Service.” The directive rescinds two regional Forest Service manual supplements “focusing on Danger Trees.”

Even so, having mistakenly claimed that dead trees are a public safety hazard (to justify logging them), the Forest Service is finding it difficult to admit it was wrong. Casamassa’s directive simply asserts that the “Regional Leadership Team” should consider “all relevant factors and risks and all the purposes for which we steward the nation’s forests” and encourages “all staff to focus on actions that can be taken now” to provide “improved access to national forest lands this field season.”

Responses vary by Forest. The Umpqua National Forest announced that most of the previously closed areas associated with 2021 wildfires are now open, keeping only three

sections closed. “The Umpqua National Forest thanks the public for their patience while the larger closure has been in effect for public safety,” said Forest Service spokesperson Chris Bentley, crediting volunteers and U.S. Forest Service staff members with getting the areas reopened, even though, “Danger trees might still fall.”

The Willamette Forest responded by preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the “2020 Fire Affected Road System Risk Reduction Project.” Still espousing the unfounded hazards “posed by fire-killed and injured trees,” the EA proposes logging 75% fewer acres than the original plan.

This demographic shift means that, instead of authorizing a logging project that will add cash to its slush fund, the Forest Service will have to pay to have trees removed. Apparently, the Forest Service would prefer to pay its timber industry cronies to cut a few scorched trees than to admit it was acting illegally in the first place.



The Hickory Ridge Lookout Tower provides a unique view of Hoosier National Forest's Charles C. Deam Wilderness Area. Built in 1936 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the fire lookout tower is the last one remaining in the Hoosier National Forest.

Featured Forest

Hoosier National Forest

Hoosier National Forest covers about half of the total public forest land in Indiana — 204,000 patchwork acres in nine south-central counties. The Forest even encompasses Indiana's only designated wilderness area, the 13,000-acre Charles C. Deam Wilderness.

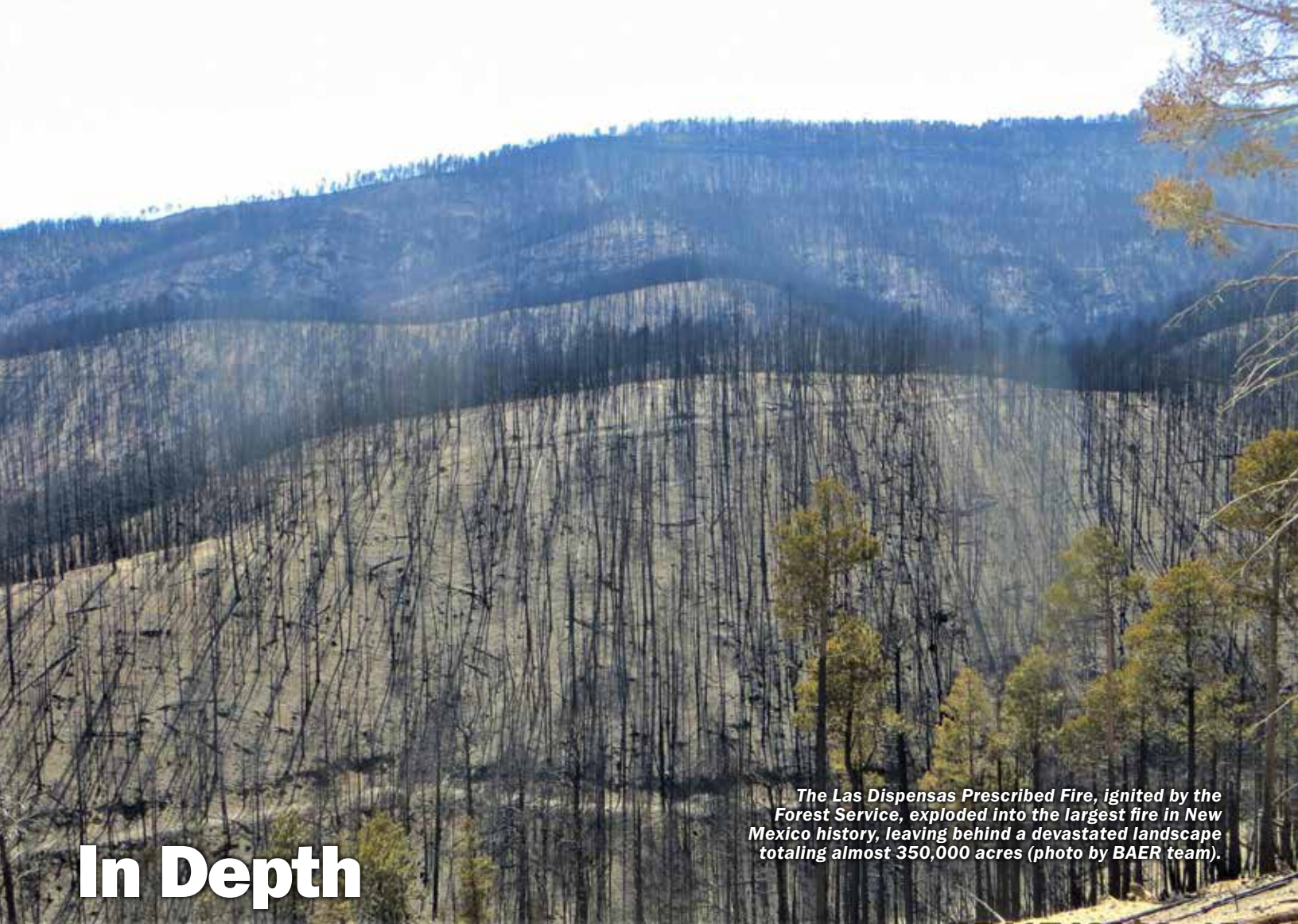
Unique ecosystems enhance the Forest's biological diversity as evidenced by various rare plants. Besides the wilderness area, the Forest includes Pioneer Mothers Memorial Forest, Hemlock Cliffs, and Wesley Chapel Gulf. Pioneer Mothers protects an 88-acre stand of old-growth trees and archaeological sites. Hemlock Cliffs is a box-shaped canyon with sandstone formations, seasonal waterfalls, and rock shelters. Wesley Chapel Gulf — a collapsed 8-acre sinkhole with an alluvial floor — provides a window into the region's

underground river system.

The Forest's gently rolling hills offer a tranquil setting for reconnecting with nature. More than 260 miles of trails entice visitors to hike, camp, picnic, mountain bike, hunt, fish, and ride horses in the Forest. Within a 2-hour drive of Cincinnati, Evansville, Indianapolis, and Louisville, the Forest is a breath of fresh air for nearby city dwellers.

Equestrian trails access five horse camps, and lakes play host to many of the Forest campgrounds. Hardin Ridge Recreation Area provides easy access to Lake Monroe. Celina Lake, Indian Lake, Tipsaw, and German Ridge Lake recreation areas also offer boating and angling opportunities.

In addition to recreation uses, Hoosier National Forest is managed for wildlife habitat, timber harvests, prescribed burns, and wetland development.



The Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire, ignited by the Forest Service, exploded into the largest fire in New Mexico history, leaving behind a devastated landscape totaling almost 350,000 acres (photo by BAER team).

In Depth

Prescribed Fire

The wildfire crisis in the West represents one of the most significant issues that the Forest Service must address. Climate change frequently gets a large share of the blame, as does the Forest Service 100-year policy of suppressing all fires “by 10 a.m.,” thereby allowing Western forests to grow denser stands of weaker trees that are more susceptible to drought and insect damage — fuel for bigger, more intense wildfires, according to the generally accepted narrative.

Many foresters and timber companies claim mechanical thinning

and tree harvesting can help restore forest health. But even if cutting trees were proven to be an effective approach to wildfire mitigation, the massive amount of forested land in question dwarfs the U.S. capacity for mechanical “forest treatment,” even with the additional \$5.5 billion in Forest Service funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Scientific consensus calls for prescribed fire to address the problem, but on April 6, the Forest Service started a prescribed burn in Santa Fe National Forest that quickly grew into the catastrophic Hermits

Peak Fire, the largest wildfire in New Mexico history, raising serious questions about prescribed fire.

The use of prescribed fire in North America predates the arrival of Europeans. Environmental archaeologist Christopher Roos studies ancient fires — patterns, frequencies, and intensities — to understand the role Native Americans played in forest management. Roos and his colleagues published a study in 2020 that examines how various types of fire management have affected the forest ecosystem at Wabakwa, an archaeological site in northern New



The massive smoke column from the Hermits Peak Fire provides an indication of the severity of forest destruction (InciWeb photo).

Mexico not far from where the Hermits Peak Fire burned.

Located in a fire-prone ponderosa pine forest in the Jemez Mountains, Wabakwa was occupied by Ancestral Puebloans from around 1140 to 1470 CE and provided an ideal site to study the northern New Mexico ecosystem prior to the Forest Service era of fire suppression. Roos and his team's dendrochronology analysis in and around Wabakwa revealed three distinct fire patterns corresponding to Ancestral Puebloan habitation (1100-1650 CE), a post-habitation "free-range" fire period (late 1600s to late 1800s), and the federal fire-suppression era (late 1800s to present).

Roos and his colleagues determined that, while Wabakwa was inhabited, the area was characterized by a patchwork of small, frequent fires, which would have been set by the inhabitants as part of their subsistence and cultural activities. After the inhabitants departed, the patchy fires around Wabakwa stopped, and the site was characterized by widespread, low-level wildfires, a pattern consistent with other ponderosa forests, where wildfires occurred naturally at approximately 15-20-year intervals.

The last recorded wildfire in the study area occurred in 1893, and from that time to the present — a period

characterized not only by fire suppression, but also by logging and livestock grazing — Roos and company documented significant changes in forest structure. The absence of low-intensity fires allowed the forest to grow denser. Combustible materials — leaves, needles, downed branches, etc. — increased significantly during this period, creating fuel loads "unprecedented in at least the 880 years since Wabakwa was established in 1140 CE."

The work of Roos and his colleagues shows that fire is critical to a healthy northern New Mexico ecosystem, and other researchers have documented similar findings across the West. The Forest Service faces a challenging paradox. Unprecedented fuel loads increase the risk of catastrophic wildfire, but fire affords the only possibility of reducing those fuel loads at the required scale. Ending prescribed fires is not an option.

Still, questions raised by the Hermits Peak Fire persist. Answers to those questions point to problems within the Forest Service. For example, the Forest Service "Incident Overview" posted on InciWeb, claims, "Forecasted weather conditions were within parameters for the prescribed fire" and "unexpected erratic winds in the late afternoon caused multiple spot fires that spread outside the project boundary." But the National Weather Service had issued Red Flag warnings for the region, indicating that the combination of temperature, humidity level, and wind would increase regional fire danger on the day the prescribed fire was ignited.

Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez represents the congressional district hit hardest by the fire. In a letter to Forest Service Chief Randy Moore, she wrote, "Northern New Mexico had an extremely dry winter, is in a prolonged drought, and is currently experiencing a warm spring with erratic winds. ... These conditions are not rare during spring in New Mexico. I, and many in the local communities, were shocked that the Forest Service would perform a prescribed burn during these conditions."

The Forest Service conducted an internal review of the Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire, which became the Hermits Peak Fire. That self-assessment offers some interesting insights, beginning with Chief Moore's claim that climate change "is leading to conditions on the ground we have never encountered," a claim that Fernandez' letter refutes.

Further undermining the climate change excuse, a scientific report published in 2007, *Medieval Drought in the Upper Colorado River Basin*, concludes that "multi-decadal droughts" have been common in the Southwest during the past 1,260 years, including one that persisted for "about six decades ... in the mid-1100s." Even without the effects



The Hermits Peak Fire approaches the community of Sapello, New Mexico, on May 8 (InciWeb photo).

of climate change, current drought conditions are not unprecedented, as Chief Moore has suggested, and for 15 years, the Forest Service failed to incorporate this knowledge into prescribed fire policies.

The Forest Service review also states, “The review team found that the personnel assigned to the Las Dispensas Prescribed Fire followed their approved prescribed fire plan.” That an approved plan ignited the largest wildfire in New Mexico history demands a serious critique of Forest Service policies and procedures, but this internal review does not qualify as that critique. In fact, the Forest Service report reads like a combination of distractions and weak excuses.

The review blames “competing obligations” that “limit the ability of the workforce to prioritize and focus on prescribed fire projects,” the Trump administration’s “government shutdowns, a global pandemic, and Mexican Spotted Owl regulations.”

Legitimate factors mentioned in the report (but glossed over in its conclusions) include “outdated training and education,” “adherence to policy,” “fine fuel accumulation—post mechanical treatment, and increased heavy fuel loading after fireline preparation.”

At one point, the review suggests, “The agency’s commitment to prescribed fire will need to be commensurate with the effort that is invested in wildland fire suppression.” Given the ineffectiveness of fire suppression in combating these so-called megafires, this recommendation reads as a thinly veiled bait and switch for doubling the Forest Service budget after the agency just received a historic budget increase.

A more sensible approach would be to shift resources expended on costly, unproductive fire suppression activities to developing more practical, better-informed prescribed fire policies and the professional staffing needed to implement those policies. Experts

like fire ecologist Timothy Ingalsbee agree.

Ingalsbee is part of the scientific consensus calling for creation of a professional workforce dedicated to expanding prescribed fire. In an interview on National Public Radio, he said he hopes the Forest Service will finally take steps to implement its stated goal of making a fundamental shift away from prioritizing wildfire suppression. “If we were to shift those resources and funding into prescribed burning, have as many crews as possible to manage prescribed burning, that would be a big help.”

On the political front, Rep. Fernandez called for an investigation by the Government Accountability Office and got one. “For the United States Forest Service to say they followed their policies and procedures does not take into account that those policies and procedures themselves were flawed,” she said.



Tree thieves cut down this tree so that they could take a burl that developed well above the ground.

Guest Essay

Tree Thieves in the Redwoods

by Lyndsie Bourgon

The Redwood Highway is a stretch of California's Highway 101, an artery that skirts the Pacific Coast and stretches from Los Angeles up through the state's northernmost counties and into the heart of Cascadia. If you are driving north from Humboldt County's largest city, Eureka, your passage is guided by the unfurling crystal waves and white-sand beaches of Big Lagoon and Freshwater Bay.

Orick sits along a slight bend in the highway, its businesses and houses stretched long and thin, home to just under 400 people. ("And I'm quite certain that counts 80 sheep," clarifies Jim Hagood, owner of the town hardware store.) Burl shops, the sole remaining industry, dot the highway, beckoning tourists to visit with intricately carved figures and tables hewn from redwoods.

Until relatively recently, one or two burls a year might be poached from Redwoods National and State Parks, which directly border the town. Most often, they ended up forged into bowls, crafted into statues, or sold as slabs at those burl shops. But in the early 2010s, that changed: so much wood poaching was taking place that Redwoods rangers began calling it a "crisis." From 2012 to 2014, nearly 90 burls were poached from 24 trees. One redwood had been felled to harvest a burl growing high up its trunk. The Lady Bird Johnson Grove Trail, designated the park's foundation in 1968, had been, in the words of one ranger, "all hacked up," as had trunks along the popular

Tall Trees Trail. "There was his huge [realization of] holy smokes, they're just hitting everything, whenever, with no thought of getting caught," says Brett Silver, who headed the region's state parks at the time.

That spate of poaching would eventually die down, but it did not disappear. In *Tree Thieves*, I profile two high-profile burl poaching cases, both rooted in the town of Orick. The most recent — the case of Derek Hughes — wrapped up in the summer of 2021. The Hughes case was one of only a few from the region to make it through the court system. The National Park Service struggles to prosecute poachers. California's parks are vast, and park wardens face an impossible hurdle: their charges cannot speak for themselves, cannot serve as their own witnesses. So it becomes a game of chance — you pray for a visitor to notice a cut and report it, or you hope to catch a poacher in the act.

One challenge that park management faces when it comes to prosecuting timber poaching is securing arrest warrants and moving cases forward in the court system. Many district attorneys don't want to take on poaching cases because — according to one former Redwoods National and State Park ranger, Laura Denny — "when there's murders and there's rapes or whatever going on, that's going to take higher priority than someone taking a tree." The punishments are often middling, and in cases like Humboldt, prisons are overcrowded. The local legal

system therefore has a high expectation of concrete evidence that will justify prosecuting a poacher.

At the time that Hughes's case was being investigated, a new deputy district attorney arrived in Humboldt and began making a name for himself by prosecuting environmental crimes. Adrian Kamada is known for his commitment to wildlife prosecution, and he started the job fully aware of the wood-poaching cases that plagued the park. Kamada had a strong interest in environmental crime, and he was keen to support law enforcement working to prevent it. As Derek Hughes was being caught on forest cameras that had been hidden in redwood branches, Kamada was prosecuting one of the most bizarre environmental crimes in recent Humboldt history: poachers had scaled the cliffs near Orick, pilfering thousands of *Dudleya* succulents (commonly known as "liveforevers") to put up for sale online and in overseas markets.

Park rangers say their options for catching poachers are limited, and they mean so on both a logistical and financial scale. To remotely monitor every at-risk old-growth tree in Redwood National and State Parks alone would be utterly impractical. The same goes for cordoning off the park with fences to keep out night-hikers or those who drive in at midnight.

The Park Service has also installed tip lines, but information flows through them only sporadically. So rangers rely on serendipity, bolstered by local contacts — the spark of recognition of a cut site on a field-day patrol, sometimes followed up on with local informants who might know something.

"Realistically," says one Redwoods ranger, Branden Pero, "[we could dedicate] one or two full-time rangers specifically to try and find this stuff. But finding the money to fill positions solely for that, when we have other things that tie us up" Still, personal grudges and turf wars in the woods have prompted poachers to sell each other out to law enforcement. In some cases, the Park Service has offered to forgive minor charges pending against a confidential informant if they furnish information on a poaching site. In the same vein, the Redwoods Park Association has partnered with the Save the Redwoods League to offer a \$5,000 reward for anyone pointing them in the direction of poachers.

Lyndsie Bourgon is a writer, oral historian, and 2018 National Geographic Explorer. Her first book, *Tree Thieves: Crime and Survival in North America's Woods*, came out in June 2022.



A fresh tree stump signals the site of a recent tree theft.



A ranger measures the cuts made to remove a large burl from a protected redwood grove.

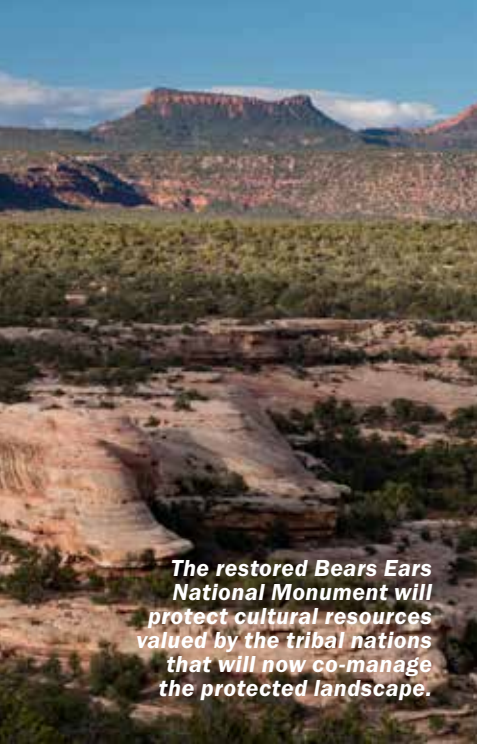
Native American Tribes Will Co-manage Bears Ears

After restoring and expanding Bears Ears National Monument, the Biden administration signed a historic agreement that gives Southwestern tribes a role in managing the monument.

Under Secretary Deb Haaland's leadership, the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, along with the U.S. Forest Service, signed the agreement with the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and Pueblo of Zuni.

According to the agreement, each tribe will have one elected officer added to the Bears Ears Commission. The commission and the federal agencies will be in charge of "planning, management, conservation, restoration, and protection of the sacred lands."

"Instead of being removed from a landscape to make way for a public park, we are being invited back to our ancestral homelands," said Carleton Bowekaty, lieutenant governor of the Pueblo of Zuni.



The restored Bears Ears National Monument will protect cultural resources valued by the tribal nations that will now co-manage the protected landscape.

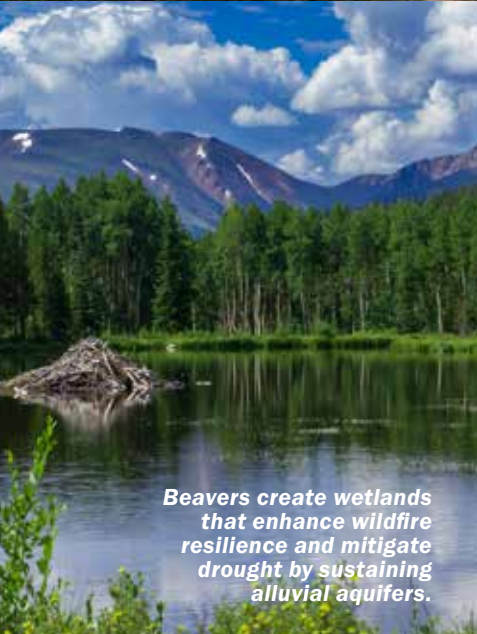
Beavers Can Spearhead Climate Action

A recent report by Emily Fairfax and Chris Jordan finds that "biological components," beaver in particular, are critical to restoring "the full process-based functionality of connected floodplain systems."

The authors note that rivers and streams, "are naturally resilient systems" when fully connected to their floodplains, improving water quality and quantity; supporting biodiversity; increasing flood, drought and fire resiliency; and bolstering carbon sequestration.

Without beavers, "The stream-floodplain system falls into disrepair. Once they are disconnected from their floodplain, down-cut, incised streams simplify into single-threaded channels. Sediment and carbon are exported from long-term storage, water warms and becomes eutrophic, the landscape dries out, and fires run for miles across a uniform expanse of fuel, all leaving little in the way of healthy habitat for fish and wildlife. ...

"Process-led and beaver-based restoration should be the foundation of our national freshwater climate action plan."



Beavers create wetlands that enhance wildfire resilience and mitigate drought by sustaining alluvial aquifers.


Nantahala, Pisgah National Forests Ban Ginseng Harvest

A ban on collecting wild ginseng in the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests will remain in place until the ginseng population recovers. Prior to the 2021 ban, collecting ginseng on national forest lands was capped to prevent over-harvesting.

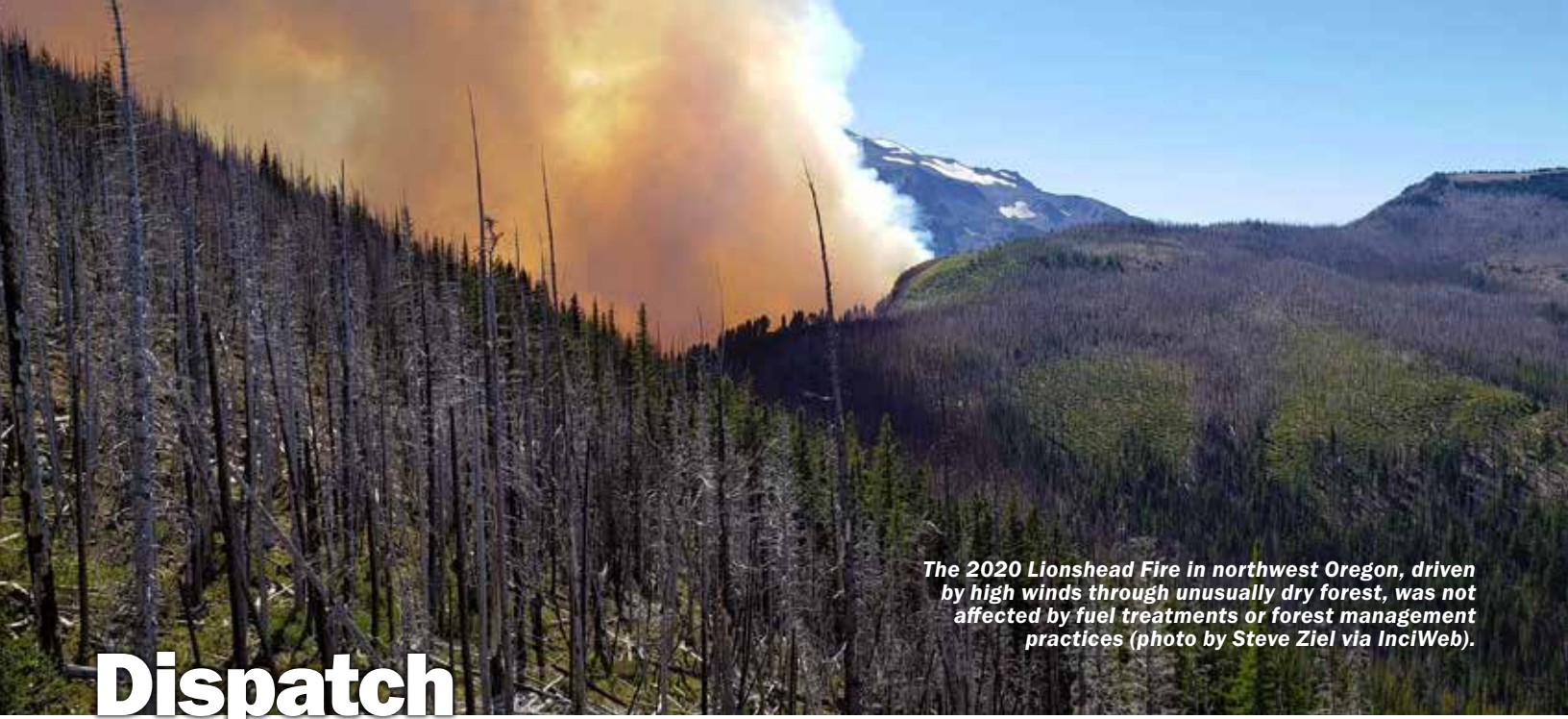
According to Forest Service scientists, the prized plant's decline made harvesting unsustainable at any level. "Suspending ginseng harvest helps ensure wild ginseng on our national forests can rebuild its population. If we keep harvesting, the danger is that they'll completely disappear," said Gary Kauffman, botanist for the National Forests in North Carolina.

The ginseng trade in the Appalachian Mountains dates back 250 years. "Ginseng harvest has been part of Appalachian culture for generations, and we want to see that continue into the next generation," said Kauffman.

Ginseng is being reintroduced into the national forests using seeds from local production beds.



Wild American ginseng is prized for its reputed medicinal properties, especially the roots of mature plants.



The 2020 Lionshead Fire in northwest Oregon, driven by high winds through unusually dry forest, was not affected by fuel treatments or forest management practices (photo by Steve Ziel via InciWeb).

Dispatch

Fuel Treatments Provided Minimal Benefit in Oregon Fires

A recent report on the 2020 Oregon wildfires finds “little evidence to support the use of fuel treatments to mitigate fire severity under extreme fire-weather conditions.” Published in *Ecosphere* by researchers with the Forest Service and Oregon State University, the report concludes, “The influence of forest management on fire severity was minimal, and variation in forest structure or fuels played relatively little role.”

The researchers also found the 2020 fires were “remarkably consistent” with historical fires, based on reports from the early 1900s and “paleo- and dendro-ecological records,” which document similar and perhaps larger wildfires in the region over the past millennium. These previous fires “shared similar seasonality, weather conditions, and even geographic locations.”

The study also notes, “Conflicting, uncertain, and oversimplified explanations of the 2020 Labor Day fires signal how unfamiliar modern society is with wildfires in wetter forest types of the western United States.” Drier forests, where fires are more frequent, inform “much of what we know about fire, fuels, and climate,” but that knowledge “cannot be readily transferred to wetter forests,” the study finds.

Since “fuel treatments” — things like forest thinning and creating fuel breaks — “are unlikely to mitigate fire severity during extreme weather,” the researchers

recommend focusing on other measures “to help reduce losses,” including implementing Firewise USA principles and “structural-hardening techniques.”

The Firewise program provides practical principles to protect lives and property: “Wildfire behavior is influenced by three main factors: topography (lie of the land), weather (wind speed, relative humidity and ambient temperature) and fuel (vegetation and man-made structures). ... Of these three factors, fuel is the only one we can influence” (www.nfpa.org).

The Firewise Guide notes that things like dead leaves and pine needles on decks and in gutters can ignite from embers and that fire burning along the ground can “ladder” into shrubs and low-hanging branches, creating larger flames. Combustible residential features like wood siding and wood (shake) shingles can also serve as fuel “and become part of a disastrous chain of ignitions to other surrounding homes and structures.”

Other risks include “vulnerable openings” such as unscreened attic vents, which can allow wind-blown embers to ignite fire inside the home. In addition to vulnerabilities from construction materials and unscreened vents, the Guide emphasizes the surrounding landscape up to 100 feet as a more significant risk factor than where the home is located — e.g., in the wildland-urban interface versus a more urban setting.



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Call to Action

Today you can make a difference that will last forever. By calling your U.S. senators and asking them to support the Wild Olympics Wilderness Act (S. 455), you will help protect a piece of our nation's wild legacy.

The Wild Olympics bill will protect in perpetuity 126,500 acres of Olympic Mountains rainforest and 464 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers, including Moonlight Dome's incomparable old-growth forests.

The Wild Olympics Wilderness bill has passed the U.S. House and now awaits Senate action. Your call now can make all the difference in preserving these National Forest treasures.

Please, call your U.S. senators today at (202) 224-3121. Go ahead and make the call twice to connect to each of your two senators.

Old-growth forest on Washington's Olympic Peninsula deserves the protection that would be provided by the Wild Olympics Wilderness Act.