

FOREST NEWS



Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics

Summer 2025

Beaverhead- Deerlodge National Forest



Inside

BIG BLOWUP / ROADLESS RULE RESCISSION / CADDO LAKE /
GUEST AUTHOR: BEN GOLDFARB / CHEATGRASS AND CATTLE

Not for Sale

This year, the American people made their values unmistakably clear: our public lands are not for sale.

In an era when billionaires treat mountaintops like private playgrounds and corporations eye our forests for profit, one might wonder whether the notion of land held in common – open to all, stewarded for future generations – could still hold sway. It does. And it's worth celebrating.

From New England's town forests to the wildest corners of the Alaska outback, our public lands are a uniquely American idea. They're not inherited from monarchs or reserved for the elite. They're the birthright of every American – Native, immigrant, rich or poor, hunter or hiker, logger or treehugger. They're where we go to work, to wander, to heal, and sometimes to fight.

So when privatization schemes rear their heads – whether wrapped in the flag of “local control” or buried in the fine print of budget riders – the backlash is swift. This year, grassroots campaigns, tribal nations, hunters, veterans, environmentalists, and public employees stood shoulder to shoulder in defense of public ownership. They reminded elected officials of an essential truth: selling off national forests, parks, refuges, or rangelands is not a policy debate. It's a betrayal of the public trust.

Forest Service employees know this better than most. We have walked the contested ground. We've watched clear-cuts cross streams meant to be protected. We've reviewed permits that grant oil-and-gas firms more access than the public enjoys. And yet we return to work each day because we believe in the idea – even when the execution falters.

The idea is simple: the land belongs to all of us. The challenge, of course, lies in its implementation. Public ownership without public ethics invites abuse. Without transparency, accountability, and a moral compass, a

national forest becomes just another commodity. But when land is managed with humility, science, and the public interest front and center, it becomes something extraordinary: a shared trust across generations.

In 2025, that trust was tested again. And once again, it held. Proposals to dispose of public acreage to balance budgets or curry favor with industry lobbyists were met with outrage. Public comments overflowed. Letters to the editor rang with passion. In some of our most conservative districts, people reminded their representatives: “Keep your hands off our land.”

This renewed defense of public lands is not partisan, nor is it nostalgic. It is pragmatic. Americans understand that, in a warming world with shrinking biodiversity and rising inequality, public lands are more vital than ever. They store carbon, safeguard drinking water, offer recreation to those who can't afford ski resorts, and provide quiet to a noisy nation. You cannot put a price tag on that. Or rather – you can, but it would be theft.

So let's take a moment to be grateful. Not complacent – grateful. Public land doesn't protect itself. That job falls to us: the watchdogs, the whistleblowers, the quiet caretakers in boots and uniforms. It falls to those who draft NEPA documents with integrity, who mark trailheads instead of boundaries, who ask not how fast we can cut but how long we can sustain.

In this country, the land is not a prize to be won. It's a promise to be kept. And in 2025, the American people kept it.

Sincerely,



Andy Stahl

Cover: Wade Lake on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (USFS photo by Preston Keres).

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Eureka Basin lies on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest near Alder, Montana.

Featured Forest

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest

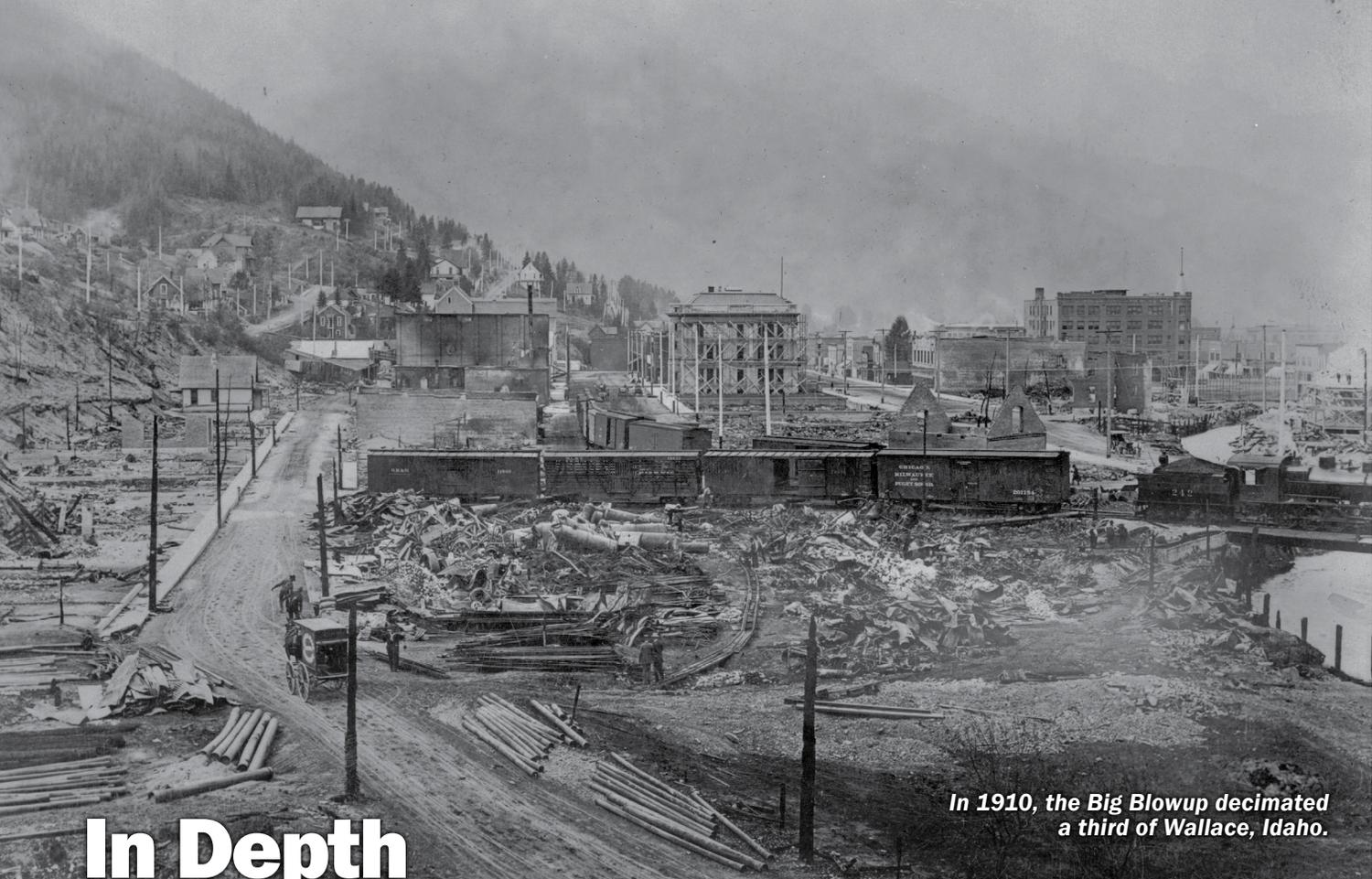
At 3.36 million acres, the **Beaverhead-Deerlodge** is Montana's largest national forest. The Forest provides habitat for 355 species of birds, including bald eagles, sandhill cranes, golden eagles, and trumpeter swans, the largest waterfowl in North America. President Theodore Roosevelt signed the legislation creating the two forests in 1908, and they were merged in 1996.

In the original legislation, Deerlodge National Forest was named the Big Hole Forest Reserve. **Roosevelt pushed for its protection** because the Montana-based Anaconda Copper Mining Co. had begun clear-cutting the upper Big Hole River watershed. The ensuing erosion, along with thick air pollution from the Anaconda smelter, was devastating the region. Ranchers and conservationists alike complained to Roosevelt, who made several trips to the area.

In 1805, the Lewis and Clark Expedition crossed the Continental Divide at Lemhi Pass in the Bitterroot Range, arriving at the headwaters of the Columbia River in what is now Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. At the

pass the explorers realized that the dream of a Northwest Passage — a waterway that would cross the Rocky Mountains and connect the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic — would not be realized.

The 158,712-acre Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness Area lies in the Beaverhead portion of the national forest as well as parts of the Bitterroot National Forest. **The Beaverhead-Deerlodge includes** parts of the Bitterroot, Centennial, Pioneer, Gravelly, Sapphire, Tobacco Root, Flint Creek, Elkhorn, Boulder, and Highland mountain ranges. The Forest's ponderosa-pine, fir, spruce and juniper woodlands provide habitat for black bear, grizzly bear, cougar, Canada lynx, elk, mule deer, moose, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, coyote, bald eagle, bull trout, Arctic grayling, and gray wolf. The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and the Nez Perce National Historical Trail both pass through sections of the Forest, part of a 1,500-mile hiking trail network. Other recreational features include 50 campgrounds, dozens of lake- and river-boating access points, and groomed snowmobile trails.



In Depth

In 1910, the Big Blowup decimated a third of Wallace, Idaho.

The Big Blowup and its Lasting Legacy

Following a fire season that started in April and grew worse during a summer of drought conditions, hurricane-force winds battered Idaho, Montana, and Washington on Aug. 20, 1910. The winds breathed new life into small and smoldering fires across the Northern Rockies. The ensuing conflagrations, collectively known as the Big Blowup, proved unstoppable. As Forester [Edward G. Stahl](#) recalled, flames hundreds of feet high were “fanned by a tornadic wind so violent that the flames flattened out ahead, swooping to earth in great darting curves, truly a veritable red demon from hell.”

The Big Blowup burned more than 3 million acres of federal and private land. A total of 1,736 separate fires killed at least 85 people. The Forest Service had been

established just five years earlier, and the Big Blowup deeply impacted the fledgling agency. As the name suggests, the Big Blowup made a lasting impression on anyone who experienced it, including three future Forest Service chiefs who were directly involved in the catastrophe as well as [several other men](#) who would exert influence over the agency’s future fire-protection policy. Today those policies continue to influence national and global fire-management practices.

Prior to Aug. 20, the young Forest Service had engaged in its first great firefight. Cinders from trains ignited fires in slash along the tracks at the height of a drought. The fires spread; Forest Service firefighters contained the fires then lost containment. The agency rounded up pretty much any warm bodies and shipped them into the

backcountry. Northwestern units of the U.S. Army were mobilized to fight the fires.

After a summer of marginally successful firefighting efforts, the winds that ripped through the Northwest on Aug. 10 overwhelmed every available firefighting resource and imperiled crews working in the backcountry. As [Stephen J. Pyne](#) writes for *High Country News*, the Big Blowup, in just 36 hours, accounted for an estimated 75% of the total acreage burned during the 2010 fire season. “The fire’s convection sucked in air from all sides, snapping off mature larch and white pine like matchsticks, spawning firewhirls like miniature tornadoes, flinging sparks like a sandstorm. Crews dropped their saws and mattocks and fled.” Seventy-eight firefighters died that day.

The Coeur d’Alene National Forest bore the brunt of the

firestorm. **Pyne writes** that 1,800 firefighters and two companies of the 25th Infantry manned the fire lines in the St. Joe Mountains between Wallace and Avery, Idaho, when the Blowup assailed the region. Crews had little, if any, warning, and those who managed to survive told harrowing tales.

North of Avery, Ranger William Rock led a crew to a previously burned area. The crew survived except for one man who panicked and shot himself twice rather than face the inferno. A crew at the Bullion Mine split. The larger group sheltered in a side adit; the other eight men died in the main shaft. Twenty-eight men died on Setzer Creek as they tried to flee. A crew of 19 took refuge in a cabin along Big Creek. When the roof caught fire, they ran out. The first 18 died almost instantly. The other man, Peter Kinsley, twisted his ankle at the doorway and fell to the ground where he found fresh air. Two days later he was found after he crawled out of a creek.

Ranger Ed Pulaski's heroism that day quickly became legend. Fighting a fire about 10 miles southwest of Wallace, Pulaski ordered his crew of 43 men to follow him to a mineshaft. One man was too slow and died in the flames. The rest barely outran the fire. Pulaski hung blankets over the entrance and ordered his men to lie down on the tunnel floor, threatening to shoot anyone who tried to flee. Using water from a small stream that flowed out of the tunnel, Pulaski kept the blankets wet with hatfuls of water until he was overcome by the smoke. When the men awoke the next day, all but five had survived. Of the survivors, Pulaski suffered more than most. He was temporarily blinded by the ordeal, and his lungs were so damaged that he could barely breathe.

Newspapers across the country quickly spread the story of Pulaski's courageous actions, elevating him to mythic stature in Forest Service history. He added another chapter to his legend when he invented the firefighting



W.W. Morris stands on a charred tree trunk near the mouth of the tunnel where Ranger Edward Pulaski sheltered with his men during the Big Blowup. All but five of the men survived (photo ca. September 1910).

tool that bears his name by combining an axe and a mattock in one tool that has been standard issue for wildland firefighters for decades. Pulaski was never compensated for wounds received during the firestorm nor



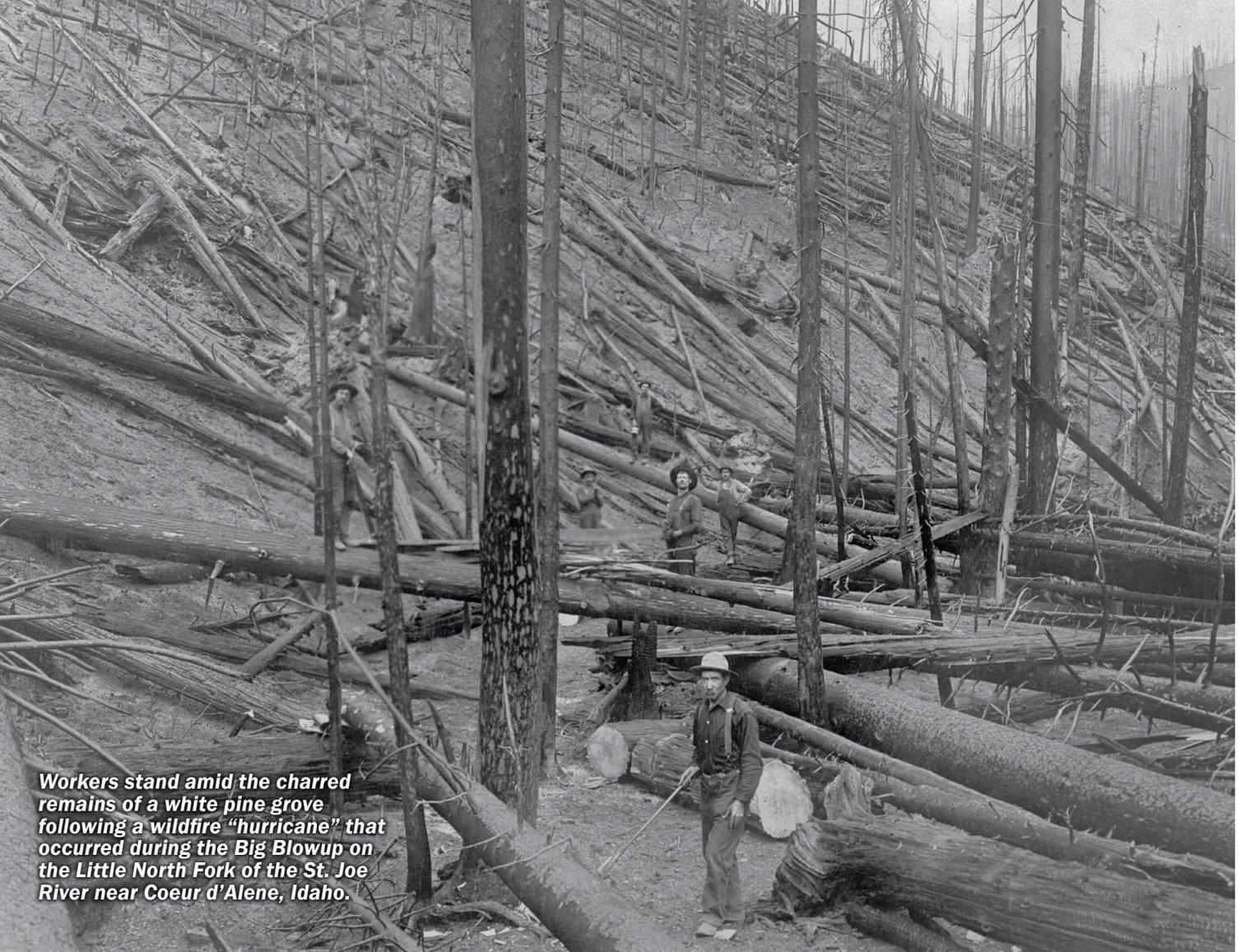
The Big Blowup decimated this white pine/red cedar forest near Saltese, Montana, on the Lolo National Forest.

for his invention, but in 1923 he wrote an account of his actions in the Big Blowup for an essay contest because he needed money to pay for eye surgery. He won \$500.

Even before the fires burned themselves out, the Forest Service was actively defending its reputation and justifying its policy of extinguishing all fires as quickly as possible. Those who fought and survived the fire knew they had been thoroughly defeated by the forces of Nature. After the flames had ripped through the Bitterroot Mountains, Lolo National Forest Supervisor Elers Koch considered the 1910 firefighting efforts to be a “complete failure” that saw the Forest Service expend almost a million dollars over budget.

But several foresters, including Forest Service Chief Henry Graves, called for an aggressive fire prevention policy to protect the nation's forests and economic well-being. Ferdinand Silcox headed the region's quartermaster corps during the fire and later served as Forest Service chief in the 1930s. He argued that fire should be eliminated from the landscape. He believed that applying science, technology, and manpower would solve the problem and prevent future disasters. Others pointed to heroic efforts by the Forest Service during the disaster as evidence that the agency needed more funding to meet the demands of its mission. (In retrospect, these early efforts to defend and promote the Forest Service **likely distorted the historical record**, understating the contributions of those conscripted to fight the fires, including 4,000 soldiers who served in roles they were not trained for.)

Not everyone agreed with these assessments. Koch argued in favor of letting backcountry fires burn



Workers stand amid the charred remains of a white pine grove following a wildfire “hurricane” that occurred during the Big Blowup on the Little North Fork of the St. Joe River near Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.

themselves out. After part of the newly created Glacier National Park burned, Secretary of the Interior Richard Ballinger supported annual burning to reduce fuel loads, a common practice among indigenous peoples at the time. But Forest Service leadership and forestry leaders like Gifford Pinchot spent years suppressing and discrediting alternative viewpoints from people like Ballinger.

Chief Graves staked the agency’s continued existence on the belief that it could actually defeat fire. To strengthen his hand, Graves adopted a collaborative approach with state and private associations to fight fire. His efforts were rewarded and given the weight of law with passage of the Weeks Act in 1911. Graves then embarked on a campaign to remove all fire from the landscape. His campaign lasted for decades and led to the creation of Smokey Bear in 1944. Thanks to the Weeks Act, state forestry agencies became beholden to the U.S. Forest Service, supporting its fire-suppression policies to receive federal funding.

An ally of Graves, William Greeley, had been hand-picked by Chief Pinchot to be the Forest Service Region 1

forester overseeing 41 million acres in 22 national forests, mainly in Montana, Idaho and Washington. Greeley was the son of a Congregational minister, and in 1920, he became Forest Service chief. Convinced that the Big Blowup was the result of Satan’s work, Greeley, driven by religious fervor, made fire suppression a focus of the agency, fundamentally changing forest ecology across the country. Other nations adopted the U.S. fire suppression model, part of the legacy of the Big Blowup.

Greeley and his next two successors, Robert Stuart and Ferdinand Augustus Silcox, were all personally involved in the Big Blowup. Silcox concluded the lesson was that fires were wholly preventable by deploying more money, more men, more trails, and a stronger will. In 1934, the Selway fires sparked a review of Forest Service fire policies. The agency admitted that, in spite of increased funding, the lands it managed were in worse shape than when responsibility for those lands was taken from the Interior Department and shifted to the Forest Service in the Ag Department. In the wake of the review, Chief Silcox faced critics who observed that the Forest Service was unable to contain backcountry burning and

scientists who demonstrated that fire was beneficial to certain tree species.

One critic, Ed Komarek, noted that such facts had been shielded from the public view. Lolo National Forest Supervisor Elers Koch asserted that the pursuit of fire into the backcountry, especially road-building, was undermining the cultural value of those lands. Lolo Pass, a key point on Lewis and Clark's journey through the Bitterroot Mountains, had been bulldozed into a highway, he complained. In response to these critics and criticisms, Silcox doubled down, announcing the 10 a.m. Policy, a decades-defining edict that established a nationwide goal of controlling every wildfire by 10 a.m. the next morning.

Driven by policies justified by the Big Blowup, "by the 1990s, the American fire establishment was a wonder of the world," Pyne writes. "It could field crews and aircraft to fight fire in numbers larger than the military of some Third World nations." Yet critics inside and outside the fire-industrial complex realized that the system was broken, based in part on increasingly large fires. **Wildfires burned over 4 million acres in 1994**, costing \$965 million above budget allocations and killing 34 firefighters.

Wildfires consumed more than 6 million acres and \$1.6 billion in 1996. Forest Service firefighters had successfully contained 98% of wildfires before they grew larger than 100 acres, a success rate they continue to maintain, yet the costs of fire suppression and wildfire destruction have continued to escalate. Forest Service officials finally admitted that firefighting alone could not contain wildfire and shifted attention to wildfire mitigation, but the admission came in the aftermath of court rulings that forced the Forest Service to greatly

restrict old-growth clear-cutting, which had already fueled an increase in catastrophic wildfire and a decline in forest health.

In 2006, wildfires burned 9.8 million acres. In each of the years 2015, 2017, and 2020, more than 10 million acres burned. Even after the admission that a century of fire-suppression policy had failed, three decades of logging under the guise of fire mitigation have only seen uncontrollable wildfires increase in size and severity.

Once again, federal leadership is doubling down on a flawed agenda that will increase logging and wildfire mitigation activities that have proven to be detrimental. According to *Redefining the Urban Wildfire Problem in the West*, published in 2024, the current paradigm is fundamentally "inconsistent" with the scientific consensus that fire is "a sustaining ecological factor in fire-adapted ecosystems."

The report was co-authored by six experts, including Stephen Pyne and three Forest Service researchers, Jack Cohen, Mark Finney, and David Calkin. Given the necessity of fire for ecosystem health, the authors call for acknowledgment that wildland fire is "ecologically appropriate and inevitable." As difficult as it may be to accept, the solution to the wildfire problem, they write, requires "much more fire and increased short-term risk."

To reduce wildfire risk at the scale needed to protect communities, the authors recommend planning and regulatory actions, including updated building codes that incorporate Firewise design. The report exposes the gap between expertise of Forest Service scientists and funding priorities of politicians and bureaucrats — priorities that continue to promote policies with a century-long track record of failure.



The recent Palisades Fire in Southern California incinerated this car and charred nearby vegetation, but the fire-hardened home survived.



An elk risks crossing a roadway in heavy traffic on Great Smoky Mountains National Park, North Carolina.

Guest Column

Braving the Road

The Out-sized Impacts of Roadways on Plants and Animals

by Ben Goldfarb

The Kicking Horse Valley, a canyon tucked into Canada’s Yoho National Park, is a challenging place to be an elk. A herd of around two dozen migratory elk spend much of the year in the valley’s confines, grazing meadows and nibbling the shrubs that sprout in rocky avalanche chutes. Their quest for food is made more complicated by the Trans-Canada Highway, the massive asphalt artery that cleaves the valley in two. During especially busy periods, a car roars down the highway every five seconds – a wall of traffic that can impede elk from roaming the valley in search of food and threatens to obliterate them when they step onto the asphalt.

Regularly braving this busy freeway, as the valley’s elk must to survive, would seem a certain death sentence. Yet the Kicking Horse herd is very much alive. Over years, the

animals have learned to navigate the highway’s dangers with intelligence and savvy. “They must be making good decisions,” says Marie-Pier Poulin, an ecologist at the University of Wyoming who has studied the herd. But their long-term survival is far from assured. And their tenuous persistence tells us much about the risks and rewards that wildlife must negotiate on a planet spider-webbed with 40 million road miles – and what we can do to help animals safely reach the habitats they need.

Poulin launched her research in October 2019, when she and colleagues began the laborious process of tranquilizing 14 female elk and affixing them with satellite collars. Over the nearly two years that followed, the animals collectively crossed the Trans-Canada Highway more than 3,000 times, yet not a single one was hit by a car – a

remarkable testament to their skill as pedestrians. “When you go into the field, you can clearly see that they’re looking both ways before crossing, and waiting for good timing to cross the road as well,” Poulin says.

But while the valley’s elk have learned to live with cars, the Trans-Canada Highway still curtails their movements. Three thousand highway crossings might sound like a lot, but, given how close elk live to the road, Poulin says it’s actually not that many – certainly far fewer than you’d expect if the elk were able to wander back and forth across the Trans-Canada at will. The animals, Poulin and her colleagues wrote, “generally minimized their interaction” with the massive freeway that bisects their range.

So why do they cross at all? In a word: food. As fresh vegetation sprouts around the valley in

spring, elk pursue these tender and nutritious greens across the highway — particularly females, whose bodies need all the calories they can get as they prepare to gestate and eventually nurse their calves. In spring, Poulin found, elk “displayed riskier behaviours, such as selection for crossing at high traffic volumes.” Moreover, elk who crossed the highway tended to hang out in lush patches of vegetation, suggesting the animals only braved traffic when the payoff was especially rewarding. Elk, like nearly all creatures, don’t want to cross roads — their need for nourishment simply leaves them no choice.

AN INFRASTRUCTURE TSUNAMI

The delicate tradeoff that the valley’s elk must make — between the risks of crossing roads and the rewards of finding food — will

only become more complex in the decades ahead. More animals than ever live in the thrall of roads. As the ecologist William Laurance has noted, our world is experiencing an “infrastructure tsunami,” a massive explosion of highway projects that will produce 15 million miles of paved road-lanes by the middle of this century. Around 90 percent of this new construction is slated for developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America — home, Laurance has noted, to “most of the world’s tropical and subtropical ecosystems that sustain unparalleled biodiversity.”

Like Yoho’s elk, tropical animals are already proving themselves capable of coping with our infrastructure — to a point. In Sri Lanka, where fishing cats often fall victim to roadkill, the felines

have responded by commandeering sewer systems as subterranean travel corridors; in China, Asian elephants have adapted to high daytime traffic by walking highways at night. Yet animals can only paddle so much against the rising tsunami. From great apes to Asiatic cheetahs, many of the planet’s most iconic species are gravely imperiled by roads and other new infrastructure. In one 2022 study, for example, researchers estimated that existing roads stand to reduce the tiger population in Nepal’s Chitwan National Park by nearly 40 percent.

“When you have animals like tigers that are on the brink, there is no such thing as a non-disturbing form of infrastructure growth,” says Neil Carter, a conservation scientist at the University of Michigan and the study’s lead author. “Countries



A black bear and her two cubs attempt to cross a road in Alberta, Canada.

like Nepal have to build and expand to a certain extent, but you have to mitigate the risks to wildlife conservation.”

FRACTURED HABITATS

And it's not just animals that are affected by roads — plants, too, are plagued. Deforestation is fundamentally a consequence of roads, which permit loggers, legal or otherwise, to bring in heavy machinery and haul out logs. In the Amazon, researchers have found, the vast majority of deforestation occurs within 3.5 miles of roads. So too in the Congo, where roads and forest destruction have exploded in tandem since 2003.

As roads transmogrify landscapes, plant communities change dramatically, too. Invasive species follow road corridors, sometimes literally hitching a ride in truck tires — like *Phytophthora lateralis*, a fungus that assaults the roots of Port Orford cedar trees in the Pacific Northwest. In Mexico, flowering trees in fragmented habitats are visited less often by pollinating insects and thus suffer higher rates of inbreeding and reduced genetic diversity. So-called “edge effects”

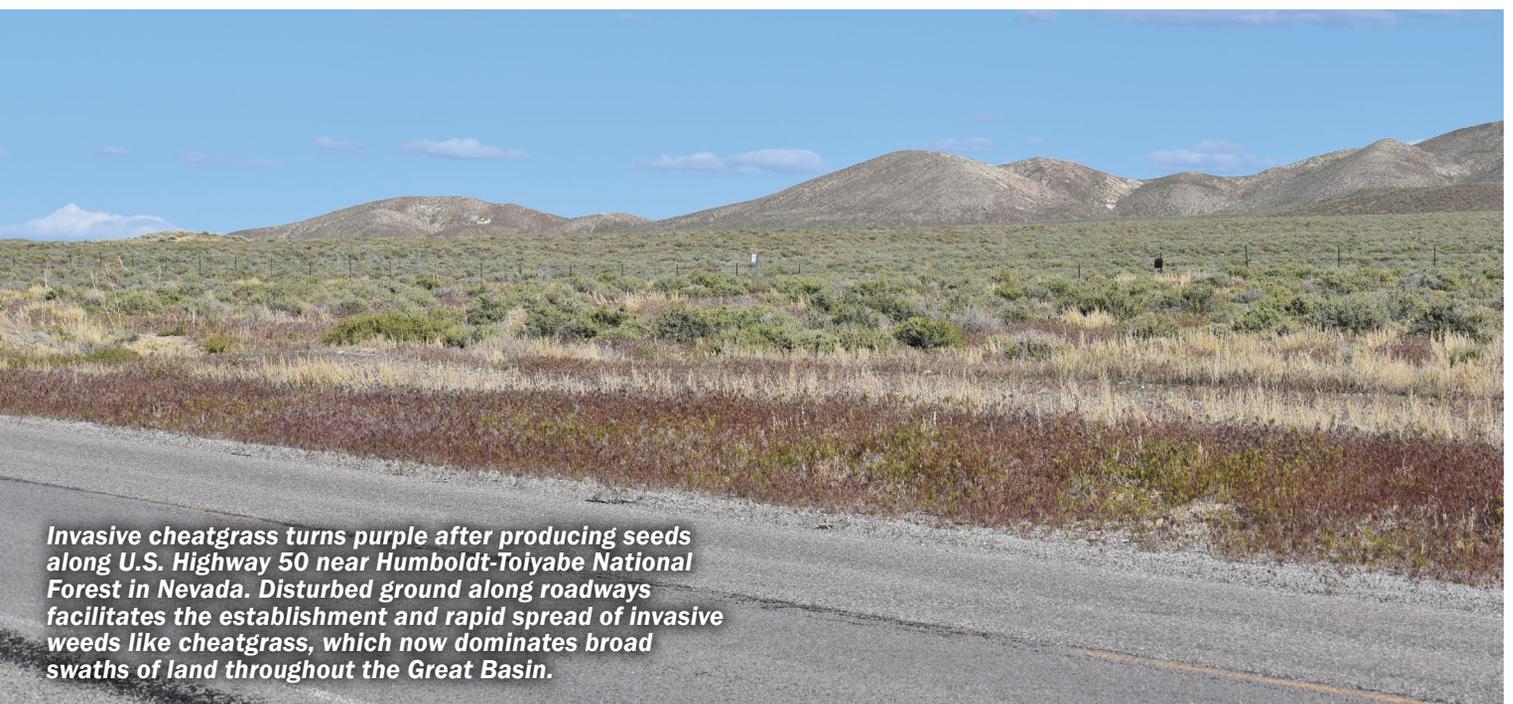
also become increasingly dangerous. When roads gash the Amazon, permitting heat, light, and wind to rush into the rainforest, trees drop leaves to conserve water which in turn fuel ground fires that open more gaps that kill more trees that become kindling for more fires, creating a fatal feedback loop.

For all these reasons and more, as new highways arise, it's vital that road developers skirt critical habitats: Once fractured, an ecosystem is not easily healed. In those cases when a new road is truly unavoidable, however, wildlife crossings — passages that permit animals to safely navigate roadways — can help blunt traffic's harms. It's true that crossings don't do much for plants, but animals certainly benefit. In Brazil, a land bridge permits golden lion tamarins to traipse over a highway that fragments Atlantic forest; in Singapore, an overpass reconnects populations of civets and pangolins. Today African elephants trudge through Kenyan underpasses as tall as houses, red crabs scramble up steel bridges on Christmas Island, and elevated roadways in India allow tigers and leopards to slink

beneath traffic undisturbed. These structures take advantage of animals' innate adaptability, giving them the opportunity to exploit resources on either side of the highways that shatter their ranges.

PROVIDING SAFE PASSAGE

Often, wildlife crossings work for many species at once. Banff National Park's famous overpasses, for example, accommodate grizzly bears, elk, moose, and a host of other critters. Sometimes, though, biologists must tailor passages to specific wild users. Consider Australia's squirrel glider, which sails through forest canopies on wing-like membranes that stretch between front and hind feet. Although most of the glider's forests were lopped down generations ago, tattered remnants of old-growth habitat still hug the Hume Freeway in the state of Victoria. In 2007, Victoria's transportation agency outfitted the freeway with road-spanning rope bridges and “glider poles,” wooden columns in the median that act as stepping stones for gliders as they coast between forest patches. The agency briefly shut down traffic to install the structures, a move that did



Invasive cheatgrass turns purple after producing seeds along U.S. Highway 50 near Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada. Disturbed ground along roadways facilitates the establishment and rapid spread of invasive weeds like cheatgrass, which now dominates broad swaths of land throughout the Great Basin.



A highway crossing reduces risk for wildlife following historic migration routes on the Flathead Reservation between Lolo and Flathead national forests in Montana.

not endear gliders to the public. “If it didn’t work I think we would’ve been hung, drawn, and quartered,” recalls Kylie Soanes, the ecologist tasked with monitoring the poles and bridges.

Eighteen anxious months followed before a bold glider tiptoed across one of the rope bridges – followed by another, and another. Soon gliders were weaving back and forth nightly, smearing their scent glands along the bridges to claim them as their territory. Most importantly, Soanes’ research showed that the animals were breeding on either side of the freeway, and that the bridges reunited once-isolated populations. “Now these structures are being installed as a matter of course every time a new road is built through glider habitat,” Soanes says. If we give animals the ability to cross our roads safely, they take advantage.

That’s a lesson that officials are now trying to apply to Yoho’s Kicking Horse Valley. Engineers are considering plans to potentially expand the Trans-Canada Highway from two lanes to four; as part of the project, they may also install roadside fences that will guide elk to underpasses at either end of the 4-mile valley. According

to Poulin, an additional underpass nearer the valley’s center, though expensive, would allow elk to more seamlessly feed on either side of the Trans-Canada, at once mitigating the risk of road-crossing and giving the animals access to the reward of fresh forage. Our roads have fractured the lives of elk, squirrel gliders, and every creature in between; now, it’s our obligation to reconnect the ecosystems and wild movements we’ve sundered.

Ben Goldfarb is the author of *Crossings: How Road Ecology Is Shaping The Future of Our Planet*, named one of the best books of 2023 by *The New York Times*, and *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter*, winner of the 2019 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award. His writings have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *Science*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *National Geographic*, *Orion Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, *The Guardian*, *High Country News*, *Outside Magazine*, *Audubon Magazine*, *Scientific American*, *The Nation*, and other periodicals. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his fiction, and his nonfiction writings have been anthologized in *The Best American Science & Nature Writing* and *Cosmic Outlaws: Coming of Age at the End of Nature*.



Some trees and other vegetation appear untouched in the aftermath of a recent fire that destroyed multiple homes and businesses in Altadena, California.



A Rio Grande turkey fans its tail feathers. The non-native species, introduced in Colorado by the Colorado Division of Wildlife, has become overpopulated.



Cattle grazing on native grasses and disturbing the ground encourages cheatgrass spread, but once cheatgrass is established, cattle can help mitigate the invasive weed.

Vegetation Near Homes — Not Always a Fire Risk

Researchers Max Moritz and Luca Carmignani have penned an article [raising concerns](#) about a California plan to ban plants within 5 feet of homes for wildfire safety. “As scientists who study how vegetation ignites and burns, we recognize that well-maintained plants and trees can actually help protect homes from wind-blown embers and slow the spread of fire in some cases.”

When living plant material is heated by fire, the scientists write, “the moisture inside it must be driven off before it can ignite. That evaporation cools the surrounding area and lowers the plant’s flammability. In many cases, high moisture can actually keep a plant from igniting.”

The authors acknowledge the importance of implementing home-hardening strategies “to protect houses, particularly from wind-blown embers,” but “green, well-maintained plants can slow the spread of a fire by serving as ‘heat sinks,’ absorbing energy and even blocking embers.”

Revenue-Driven Wildlife Management

As reported by [The Colorado Sun](#), wild turkeys are thriving in the eastern half of Colorado to the point of becoming a nuisance in towns and cities. Merriam’s turkeys are native to the foothills and mountains of Colorado, but the population explosion is occurring among Rio Grande turkeys, a species introduced to the Colorado plains by the Colorado Division of Wildlife (now Colorado Parks and Wildlife, or CPW) in the 1980s.

The introduction campaign was aggressive, and [CPW now says](#) the turkeys are “overabundant,” allowing the agency to sell more and more hunting licenses. Sales of hunting and fishing licenses provide 55% of CPW’s annual revenue. This reliance on hunting license sales has skewed policy decisions at the agency, which now masticates centuries-old piñon trees in the name of habitat improvement for elk and deer, which attract hunters from across the country.

According to “[Consequences of Pinyon and Juniper Woodland Reduction for Wildlife in North America](#),” “Most investigators found either non-significant or negative responses to tree removal by mule deer and elk.” Additionally, Removal of piñon-juniper forest increases fire risk by inviting cheatgrass incursion.

Cheatgrass and Cattle

[Regarded as](#) “one of the most significant ecological crises facing land managers in the arid West,” invasive cheatgrass has [increased fire frequency](#) in the Great Basin from once every 30-70 years to every 3-10 years.

As Aldo Leopold observes in *A Sand County Almanac*, overgrazing livestock played a major role in the spread of this invasive weed:

“Today the honey-colored hills that flank the northwestern mountains derive their hue not from the rich and useful bunchgrass and wheatgrass which once covered them, but from the inferior cheat.... The cause of the substitution is overgrazing. When the too-great herds and flocks chewed and trampled the hide off the foothills, something had to cover the raw eroding earth. Cheat did.”

In an ironic twist, recent research indicates responsible cattle grazing may help mitigate the ecological damage of cheatgrass. [One study shows](#) “a nearly complete inhibition of germination” after cheatgrass seeds pass through the digestive tract of cattle.

Trump Orders Consolidation of Fire Agencies



Citing “the devastation of the January 2025 Los Angeles wildfires,” President Donald J. Trump issued [Executive Order \(EO\) 14308](#) on June 12, 2025, mandating the consolidation of federal firefighting under a single agency. Trump’s EO echoes his “Big, Beautiful Budget for 2026, which [calls for the creation](#) of a new Federal Wildland Fire Service within the Department of Interior. Currently spread across five agencies in two Cabinet-level departments, firefighting efforts are already well underway for the current fire season.

Trump’s EO gives the secretaries of Agriculture and Interior until Sept. 10 to “consolidate their wildland fire programs to achieve the most efficient and effective use of wildland fire offices, coordinating bodies, programs, budgets, procurement processes, and research.” Yet Trump has already set back fire mitigation and suppression efforts with a [funding freeze for the work](#) and by reducing the ranks of Forest Service firefighters through layoffs and buyouts.

The EO echoes legislation proposed by U.S. Sen. Tim Sheehy, a Montana Republican, and U.S. Sen. Alex Padilla, a California Democrat. In light of Trump’s budget proposal for a fire agency in the Interior Department, the Forest Service is on the losing end of this deal. More than half of the Forest Service budget is

dedicated to firefighting and fire mitigation activities. The Forest Service was already a shell of its former self thanks to chronic under-staffing. Combined with recent buyouts, layoffs, and firings, Trump’s move to eliminate wildland fire duties from the Forest Service mission does not bode well for the agency’s future.

“The executive order is mostly political posturing.... It won’t change anything,” FSEEE Executive Director Andy Stahl told the *Daily Montanan*. “Nothing in this executive order is going to move that 98% needle,” Stahl said, referring to the Forest Service’s success rate for containing fires before they burn 100 acres.

As Associated Press journalist [Michael Brown reports](#), “Organizations representing firefighters and former Forest Service officials say it would be costly to restructure firefighting efforts and cause major disruptions in the midst of fire season.” A letter from former Forest Service chiefs states that consolidating firefighting work could “increase the likelihood of more large catastrophic fires, putting more communities, firefighters and resources at risk.”

Trump’s EO also sets a Sept. 10 deadline for “modifying or rescinding ... Federal rules or policies hindering the appropriate use of fire retardant to fight wildfires.”

Rescinding the Roadless Area Conservation Rule

During a meeting of the Western Governors' Association in New Mexico, **Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins** announced that the Department of Agriculture is rescinding the 2001 Roadless Rule. "This outdated administrative rule contradicts the will of Congress and goes against the mandate of the USDA Forest Service to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands," she said. "Rescinding this rule will remove prohibitions on road construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest on nearly 59 million acres of the National Forest System,

allowing for fire prevention and responsible timber production."

The Clinton administration implemented the Roadless Rule in 2001 based on an inventory of previously unprotected wilderness-quality lands. The rule protects 30% of national forest lands and has been attacked by every subsequent Republican administration, including President Donald J. Trump's first-term order to remove Roadless Rule protections for old-growth trees on the Tongass National Forest. That order was rescinded by President Joseph Biden.

In 2002, President George W. Bush attempted to revoke the Roadless Rule, and congressional

Democrats responded by introducing the Roadless Area Conservation Act. The bill, introduced 11 times with as many as 189 cosponsors, would make the Roadless Rule law, but despite its popularity, Congress has failed to enact the proposed legislation. Along the way, various Court decisions have upheld the Roadless Rule despite multiple efforts to eliminate it.

Rollins' announcement of the demise of the Roadless Rule is long on rhetoric, and her justification for rescinding the rule ignores congressional mandates that the Forest Service protect critical water resources. More than **370,000 miles of mostly unpaved roads**, many built for clear-cut logging, already crisscross our national forests, posing threats to drinking water sources, stream health, vital wetlands, and habitat for threatened and endangered species. In fact, the furthest anyone can be from a road anywhere in the lower 48 states is only **22 miles**.

Rescinding the Roadless Rule would not only increase road construction, but would also support clear-cutting old-growth forests and increase pollution from mineral extraction. According to the **Outdoor Recreation Roundtable**, national forests and other public lands provide the foundation for a \$1.2 trillion per year industry that would be harmed by these industrial activities.

Regardless of the veracity of Rollins' unsupported claims about benefits from eliminating roadless protections, neither she nor Trump can legally rescind the Roadless Rule by proclamation. Such a rescission requires a rule-making process that adheres to the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Endangered Species Act.



Poorly constructed and unmaintained backcountry roads contaminate pristine water resources, allow old-growth logging, and support toxic mineral extraction on our public lands.

Caddo Lake — Wetland of International Importance



Spanish moss hangs from the branches of bald cypress trees, so called because they shed their needles in autumn, and water hyacinths cover the surface of a Caddo Lake swamp.

Forests cover much of the American South, but the region does not have an abundance of national forests. However, Caddo Lake in northeastern Texas boasts impressive bald cypress forests in its shallow, mysterious waters and is recognized as a wetland of international importance under the [Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#). The Caddo Lake Ramsar site encompasses 20,000 acres, including a state park and a state wildlife area.

Collaborations between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, the U.S. Army, and the [Caddo Lake Institute](#) led to the Ramsar designation. Eagles lead vocalist Don Henley grew up in the nearby town of Linden and spent much of his childhood at Caddo Lake. In 1993 he co-founded the Caddo Lake Institute, which has spearheaded efforts to protect the lake's ecosystem, including its listing

as the 13th Ramsar site in the U.S. The designation is based on [multiple criteria](#).

CONTAINS A UNIQUE OR RARE EXAMPLE OF A NATURAL WETLAND

Caddo Lake wetlands contain one of the best examples of a mature flooded bald cypress forest in the U.S.

SUPPORTS IMPORTANT POPULATIONS OF PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES

Approximately 216 bird, 47 mammal, and 90 reptile and amphibian species occur in the area, many of which depend on the specialized habitat provided by Caddo Lake. Snowy egrets, great blue herons, and bald eagles are among the bird species that inhabit the ecosystem. A number of the lake's animals and plants are considered rare, threatened or endangered. These species include, the peregrine falcon, the alligator snapping turtle, and the eastern big-eared bat. The Caddo Lake ecosystem is one of the most diverse communities of plants in Texas,

if not the U.S. In addition to bald cypress trees draped with Spanish moss, iconic plant species include the American lotus and the American white waterlily.

SUPPORTS ANIMAL SPECIES AT CRITICAL LIFE-CYCLE STAGES

The wetlands of Caddo Lake are crucial to migratory bird species within the Central Flyway. The area also supports one of the highest breeding populations of wood ducks, prothonotary warblers, and other birds.

SUPPORTS INDIGENOUS FISH THAT CONTRIBUTE TO GLOBAL BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

Caddo Lake supports as many as 86 fish species, including 18 species of game fish, which are important to the lake's sports fishery, and the Caddo Lake Institute is working to reintroduce paddlefish, a native species.

But like other unique ecosystems, Caddo Lake faces threats from invasive species, the most serious from giant salvinia, a prolific type of water fern native to Brazil.



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Contact Your Senators

Senate Bill 1672 targets our hard-won legal victories.

If signed into law, the bill would exempt aerial fire retardant from the Clean Water Act.

Please call your U.S. senators and ask them to oppose S. 1672 to ensure our forests and drinking water are protected from toxic retardant pollution.

Last year USC scientists found that retardant contains toxic-waste levels of cadmium, vanadium, chromium, and other heavy metals.

The Congressional switchboard can connect you to your senators' offices:

202-224-3121

AP photo by Elaine Thompson