# FOREST NEWS

Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics

Summer 2026

# *Fast Fire*

## Inside

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# Grounds for Hope

A longtime FSEEE supporter recently confided to me that the countless assaults on our public lands and endless stories of environmental degradation were getting to him. He asked for a reason to hope.

The truth is, I do feel hopeful. There is a clear and prolonged arc of growing support for protecting our public lands. The Roadless Rule illustrates this groundswell. Since its inception in 2001, the rule has received 95-99% support from public commenters at every stage of the rulemaking process — including more than 1.6 million comments during the original rulemaking. That level of consensus is almost unheard of in the history of federal regulation.

Americans' eloquent comments in support of the Roadless Rule reflect the breadth and depth of their love for the wilder parts of our national forests. Whenever I need inspiration, I pull up comments from the public record. Here are some examples:

***The natural barriers that the land presents to those who would enjoy them are their greatest blessing and benefit.... The heart-to-heart talks I enjoyed with my son, cuddling up together in our sleeping bags, are a priceless treasure. Where else but in the wilderness could I tell my son that even though I would not always be with him in life, these times we shared would be?***

(Individual, Roseville, Minnesota)

***The roadless areas in our national forests have values beyond the board feet that can be hauled from them. These are places of immense biological importance for maintaining genetic diversity, these are areas that allow for recreation that cannot be found in more developed areas.... These are the areas that lift our spirits, test our bodies, renew our sanity and allow for encounters with creatures that do not live in our crowded neighborhoods.***

(Individual, Bound Brook, New Jersey)

***In Montana we love to hunt wild game. I can tell you from experience where the elk, bighorn, deer, grouse, and all other variety of wildlife like to hang out … Roadless Lands of the National Forests.... They are serving the greatest good for the greatest number just as they are — by being in their wild state as a part of our health, good fortune, and heritage.***

(Individual, Harrison, Montana)

***Our nation must work to maintain the value that is held in the simple knowledge that lands still exist free of human interference.***

(Individual, Dallas, Texas)

***The ultimate consideration, to me, is the fact that no matter what values you associate with a roadless area, once a road incurs upon that area, the values are lost forever.***

(Individual, Lewiston, Idaho)

# Inside



***Cover: Two days after the 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fire began in California, a change in wind conditions produced fast-moving fire that destroyed 1,490 buildings.***


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***Our present attitude of disregarding everything and anything of non-monetary value is getting completely out of hand. Please, let's keep something!***
(Individual, Bronx, New York)

***True conservatives value stewardship and saving for the future. Since the days of Theodore Roosevelt, true conservatives have supported protection of our beautiful natural heritage for future generations.... If we lose our last wild places to bulldozers, they will be lost for good.***
(Individual, San Diego, California)

***Spiritual values are present in the forest for both Native Americans and others. As a mainly urban society, cut off from our root connections to nature, these forests will serve to renew our spirits.***
(Organization, Cookeville, Tennessee)

***Forests serve as a place of respite from the grinding capitalism that surrounds us every day.... These forests are a huge chunk of my delight in living, my favorite places to walk and just to be.***
(Individual, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

***Quiet. Something so rare that finding it in a wild area is even surprising. Quiet is not soundless but includes the sound of falling water, singing and twittering birds, the rustle of trouser legs and boots on bushes, but it ends with the racket of gunned engines and the clank of machinery.***
(Individual, Big Fork, Montana)

***I am too old to be concerned about the welfare of our roadless areas —wilderness —for my own use or benefit, but I adamantly support the right of future generations to have that privilege.***
(Individual, Willmar, Minnesota)

***Roadlessness is a value in itself that should be conserved. Administrative costs for roadless areas will be lower than on more intensively-managed lands.***
(Individual, Lexington, Virginia)

***Let's keep the wild outdoors, God's great outdoors and leave things the way that God meant for it to be — wild!!***
(Individual, Lineville, Alabama)

***Through four decades, over 250,000 Outward Bound students have experienced the challenge, risk and adventure of a wilderness education course in the American backcountry.... Proper protection of our remaining roadless areas will enable future generations of young Americans share in the experience.***
(Permit Holder, Golden, Colorado)

***There are few places left in this country where a person may go and listen to the Earth's voice — to be able to stand on the edge of a ridgetop and see nothing of man. I have, as a child, been to places like that. Many of those areas are now resorts, housing developments, or cities.... When you cut the foundation out from under something, it weakens it. Nature is our foundation, and in all times past, our strength.***
(Individual, Houston, Texas)

We treasure roadless areas for their intrinsic natural value and as a wild legacy to pass on to future generations. Our values share a common thread: they derive from public lands remaining intact rather than being exploited.

Sadly, some do not share these values. The effort to rescind the Roadless Rule is a prime example that betrays the American public's clear and enduring will. Yet FSEEE remains unbowed. We will stand for the Roadless Rule and empower our supporters to do the same.

I'm confident that the outpouring of support for public lands will ultimately protect our wild heritage. Public lands enrich us all — and that shared legacy brings us together, providing a wellspring of hope that will never run dry.

Kevin Hood

*The first few miles of the Mt. Ellinor trail in Olympic National Forest wind through old-growth Douglas-fir forests (photo by Cecilia Timberg).*

# Featured Forest

## Olympic National Forest

Located on the Olympic Peninsula in the northwest corner of Washington, Olympic National Forest encompasses more than 2 million acres and surrounds much of Olympic National Park. Within the national forest's borders lies a striking diversity of landscapes, ranging from the rugged peaks of the Olympic Mountains to temperate rainforests, lowland river valleys, and the brackish waters of Hood Canal. The Olympic also contains some of the largest remaining stands of old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest.

Although many visitors associate the region with Olympic National Park, the national forest predates the park by several decades. The area was originally established as the Olympic Forest Reserve in 1897 and redesignated as Olympic National Forest in 1907. In 1909, a portion of the forest was set aside as Mount Olympus National Monument. That protected area was later expanded and redesignated as Olympic National Park in 1938, while the surrounding lands remained under Forest Service management.

With about 270 miles of trails for hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding, including 87 miles within the Forest's five designated wilderness areas, recreation is a large draw. Rivers such as the Dosewallips and Quinault offer prime fishing, while the mountains, forests, and waterways provide a beautiful setting for camping, wildlife viewing, hunting, boating, and more.

The Olympic landscapes stewarded by the Forest Service are also the ancestral homelands of indigenous peoples who have lived on and cared for these lands for millenia. Through a series of treaties signed in 1854-55, local tribes reserved rights to hunt, fish, gather, and conduct cultural and spiritual practices on these lands. Today, the Forest Service consults with 12 tribes with unique relationships to the Olympic Peninsula: Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation, Hoh Indian Tribe, Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, Makah Nation, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, Quileute Tribe, Quinault Indian Nation, Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe, Skokomish Tribal Nation, Squaxin Island Tribe, and Suquamish Tribe.

*Fire scientist Jack Cohen, Ph.D., delivers the April 16 keynote address at the Colorado Wildland Fire Conference in Fort Collins, Colorado.*

In Depth

# A Conversation With Jack Cohen

Dr. Jack Cohen delivered a keynote presentation at the 2026 Colorado Wildland Fire Conference in Fort Collins entitled "Community Wildfire Risk and Fire Resilient Landscapes." Just prior to his keynote, we had the opportunity to have a conversation about his work as a fire scientist.

Cohen's contributions to wildfire science as a Forest Service researcher have fundamentally reshaped our best understanding of wildfire risk to homes, lives, and infrastructure. His work has been instrumental in producing the National Fire Danger Rating System and Firewise USA community standards.

Cohen's research has demonstrated that home ignitability, rather than distant forest fire behavior, is the decisive factor in community losses. His arguments for prioritizing wildfire-resistant communities have reframed the wildfire problem from one that aims to suppress natural landscape processes to one that promotes community-scale resilience and ignition-resistant building design.

Our conversation started with a couple of disclaimers.

***Dr. Cohen:*** "I don't work for an agency anymore. I've been retired for almost 10 years, and I don't do policy. I'm a scientist."

***FSEEE:*** We'd prefer more scientists and fewer bad policies.

***Dr. Cohen:*** Well, I've got a side story on that. I was interviewed as part of a *60 Minutes* segment back in 2015. The Washington Office was very uncomfortable with the whole thing, and Steve Inskeep [of NPR] was the interviewer who contributed to their discomfort. I was familiar with Steve's style and thoroughly enjoyed his rather edgy approach and his sardonic humor.

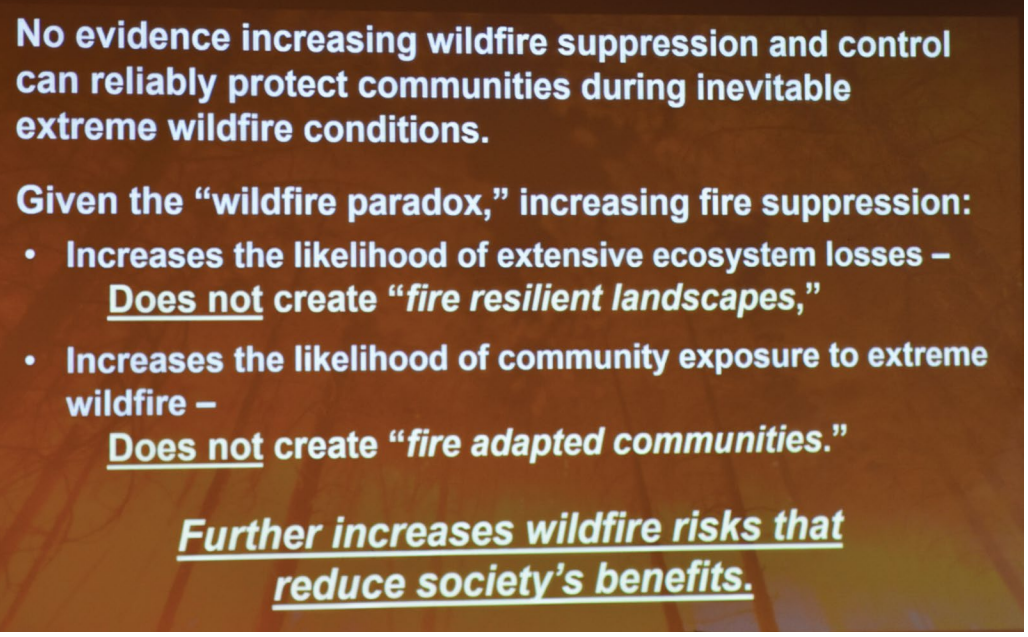
Anyway, the Washington Office wanted a representative to come and be with me during the interview, and they sent me a long list of talking points that were all policy. I rejected it and wrote back very briefly, "I don't do policy, whether it's pro or con."

***FSEEE:*** For ***Forest News***, we look for peer-reviewed science and people who have been doing the work on the ground, people who know what they're talking about. And it's amazing how wrong some policies can be and yet still be promoted.

***Dr. Cohen:*** I don't want to get too dramatic, but there seems to be extreme pressure for Forest Service fire management to maintain, at all cost, a wildfire control approach to all wildfire issues. But what I found from my research and analysis regarding wildland-urban (WU) fire destruction — using computational modeling, laboratory and full-scale field experiments, as well as WU fire disaster examinations — was that the effective problem definition and approach wasn't wildfire control.

I've been saying the same thing for almost 40 years, when I describe the physics of what determines a home ignition and where that happens. What I found countered the general perception that largely still exists as evidenced by current agency operational rationale — implying that wildland fire risk issues are primarily a wildfire control problem.

The Forest Service budget proportion for fire suppression/protection has dramatically increased over the last 40 years, more than 300%, to over half the Forest Service budget. The reaction to recent WU fire disasters with increased emphasis on wildfire control using fuel treatments and increased suppression capacity for community wildfire protection is self-evident.




*A slide from Dr. Cohen's presentation at the Colorado Wildland Fire Conference.*

Steve Pyne wrote in his book, *Between Two Fires*, about maintaining agency funding that had disappeared during the Reagan administration with a resulting major reduction-in-force. Following those funding cuts, the Forest Service established the National Wildland Urban Interface Initiative in 1987 as a federal-state program. This established the Forest Service in the role of protecting communities from wildfire and provided the rationale for enhancing fire suppression.

I had a personal experience in the early 1990s consistent with this narrative. I gave a briefing of my WU fire research results to a Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management executive in the Washington Office. When I showed him how community wildfire destruction could be prevented without wildfire control, he stopped me, and there was a long pause. He then sternly asked me, "Do you know how we get our funding?"

Effective restoration of fire-adapted landscapes and preventing WU fire disasters requires recognition that they are two things and are totally different and separable problems. The idea that somehow or another we have to do wildland fire treatment, essentially fuel treatment, to save communities is incorrect. Wildland fuel treatment is not reliably effective during extreme wildfire conditions, and ironically, ecological fire restoration will require ignition-resistant communities.

We're going to need ignition-resistant communities to do 300 million acres of fire restoration on public lands that cannot be done with 100-acre prescribed burns at a time. It cannot be done if explicit wildfire or prescribed-fire control is required. The scale of restoration is too great. And now, over three decades later, I'm giving a keynote tomorrow about how wildland fire is two different problems, two different, separable problems — one being landscape fire resilience, and the other being fire-resilient communities.

***FSEEE:*** How long were you at the Missoula Fire Sciences Lab?

***Dr. Cohen:*** I did research and development at the Missoula Lab for about 24 years; however, I did research at all three Forest Service fire labs. I started as a research scientist at the Missoula Lab in 1976. In 1979, I transferred to the Riverside Fire Lab in Southern California. After 10 years, I transferred to the Southern Forest Fire Lab in Macon, Georgia, (now defunct) and then back to the Missoula Lab in '96, where I retired in 2016.

During that 40-year period as a research physical scientist, I focused on fire modeling for developing the 1978 National Fire Danger Rating System. I then transitioned to fire-behavior modeling with applications to operational fire analysis. While researching live-fuel fire spread at the Riverside Lab, I was also an operational fire-behavior analyst and a prescribed fire supervisor in Southern California. That got me involved in how homes ignite and communities burn during extreme wildfires.

Wildland-urban fire research and analysis was my primary focus for about 15 years. The last 10 years of my research until retirement focused on the fundamental heat transfer processes of wildland fire spread in fine fuels.

***FSEEE:*** How did you get to be a wildland fire scientist?

My professional track started in Missoula as a research assistant and a technician associated with the Fire Lab starting in 1972. At that time, I was an undergraduate in a fire science program at University of Montana. I grew up in a rural/suburban part of the southern Tucson Valley, and in the Santa Rita Mountains. I grew up outside. I was fascinated with fire and was around fire a lot of the time.

I was curious and wanted to know how things happened, which is why I started to pursue a chemistry/physics major at the University of Arizona; however, the academics didn't satisfy my need to know what happens. So, I transferred to the U of Montana for the fire science option in the forestry school. I never identified with the practice of forestry, so I focused on the physics and ecology of wildland fire.

I went to graduate school in the Bioclimatology Program at CSU here in Fort Collins. I was still interested in fire, but not necessarily wildfire spread modeling. I got involved in fire modeling because my graduate project was a climatological analysis of Colorado mountain wildfire occurrence. My graduate advisor put me in touch with scientists at the Forest

Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station here in Fort Collins. These folks had already been involved in the development of the 1972 National Fire Danger Rating System. They were developing a computer version.

Thus, the newly developed Fire Danger Rating System computer model, based on the Rothermel fire spread model, became my primary tool for analyzing wildfire climatology. To use the model, I had to understand the model and that made me a fire modeler. Also, as a graduate student, I served as a member of the Pike-San Isabel Interregional Hotshot Crew.

Because I had worked with the fire meteorology project at the Rocky Mountain Research Station, upon graduation I had an opportunity for a position at the Missoula Fire Lab as a codeveloper of the 1978 National Fire Data Rating System revision. I actually had more experience with the entire code than the two other developers I was working with. So, that put me back in the Missoula Lab that had started my career as a research scientist.

***FSEEE:*** You've certainly covered a lot of bases. Given what you've learned, where do we now stand, generally speaking, in our relationship with fire?

***Dr. Cohen:*** If we look back historically, when First Peoples became established in North America, they became a natural selection factor on the landscape as the climate changed following Glacial Max. So, for the last 20,000 years, we've had people lighting fires, not fighting fires. And that changed the entire vegetation, the landscape, and thus the ecosystems. That's all been undergoing a gradual elimination ever since Europeans arrived.

With climate warming and persistent drought, we're revisiting the 1200 CE drought, the thousand-year drought that pretty much eliminated the Anasazi culture. Basically, they assimilated into the peoples that were living in the riparian zones where they could survive. So, they left the marginal lands because of the drought. Well, we're kind of revisiting that era, and I think it's likely exacerbated by climate change, climate warming, and the persistence of drought conditions.

Case in point, if you start masticating piñon-juniper trees in a persistent drought situation, you're going to lose them. The sustainability of that forest type is going to be beyond the limits set by the climate. And the climate will begin to limit and change the habitat in what I would call an *unenlightened disturbance activity*.

This happened in Eastern Oregon, where they went out and clear-cut ponderosa pine and then tried to regenerate the stand with seedlings from a nursery. They finally gave up. The stand was established during a cool wet period, and that forest couldn't re-establish without a cool wet period, which we're not in anymore.

***FSEEE:*** We keep reading reports about how wildfires are increasing, but they only cite data since the '80s, which ignores the fact that the cool wet period that gave us unrealistic expectations — for how much water the Colorado River will supply, for for example but also about fire and fire suppression. So, it's been really fascinating to read where scientists are going back prior to the 1880s and documenting that we had a drier climate, much more like what we have now.

***Dr. Cohen:*** Well, and so maybe more to the point, the best science available basically says there's no connection between wildfire intensity and what determines home ignitions and communities destroyed. The best science basically says that high intensity wildfire is not a direct determinant of urban conflagration in communities.

So, fuel treatments are largely irrelevant, and certainly unreliable for preventing wildfire-initiated structure ignitions resulting in community destruction. Most structures are ignited by windblown firebrands that easily bypass fuel treatments. The dominant paradigm — preventing community exposure by controlling extreme wildfire — is a specious supposition.

If you look at it from the landscape level, and you're suppressing fires that occur on the landscape, you find out that we've been highly effective. Before we started suppressing all fire, we had a sustained mosaic of fuel conditions that modulate fire behavior. Now, all of a sudden, our fire suppression eliminates that fuel modulation — the ecological mosaic of disturbance from fire, which means, not just fuel load, but also landscape continuity as well as species composition.

The first thing that changes is species composition. And then the continuity of that species composition changes to tree species with different fire regimes and, ultimately, to invasives. Of course, with the invasives, fire actually helps them spread because they tend to be annual grasses. So with fire suppression and fuel treatments, we're either preventing a beneficial sequence of disturbance, or we're increasing the fire occurrence through annual grass invasions.

The extreme is the situation we have in the Sonoran Desert, where annual invasives are taking out the saguaro cactus in a non-fire-adapted ecosystem. Now we're talking about the annual grass invasion and the fuel continuity of that annual grass. So, we've got a species change and a continuity increase of invasives in a non-fire-adapted ecosystem that is dramatically changing the species composition.

***FSEEE:*** Well, we're about out of time. Thank you very much for an enlightening conversation.

***Dr. Cohen:*** You bet. Great talking with you.

Brushfire.

# Fast Fire

As Westerners cope with the smoke and flames of another record-setting fire season, the media serves up dramatic videos of various active wildfires. Much of this footage focuses on dramatic images of crown fires burning through forest canopies, suggesting these fires pose the biggest threat to our communities. But according to former wildland firefighter Dr. Timothy Ingalsbee, the media perspective skews toward "hype." To counter this dominant media narrative, which he believes "is a harmful influence on forest policy in the U.S.," Ingalsbee wrote *A Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire*, which states that crown fire "is the most popular image shown on television newscasts, yet it is the rarest type of fire. Crown fires are normally fast-spreading and high-intensity fires. … They are also the fires that are near impossible to humanly contain and control."

For land-management agencies, this type of media footage has proven effective at instilling fear that can be used to rally support for industrial tree-thinning. On the one hand, as Ingalsbee observes, crown fires are relatively rare; on the other hand, they are virtually impossible to control. From a forest management perspective, the essential question becomes, "Should we spend billions of taxpayer dollars based on the idea that forest-thinning will protect lives and communities by reducing the threat from crown fires?"

A research team led by University of Colorado Professor Jennifer Balch examined the most destructive fires from 2001 to 2020 and published its findings in 2024. It turns out fast-spreading crown fires represent a small fraction of the most destructive fires, which are characterized by "extremely rapid growth." The Balch report cites three examples:

- The 2018 Camp Fire in California, which burned 52,000 acres the day it started, killing 85 people and destroying 16,000 homes.
- The 2021 Marshall Fire, the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history, was driven by winds

in excess of 100 mph and traveled 3 miles within the hour it started, burning over 1,000 homes.

- The 2023 Lahaina Fire in Hawaii killed 101 people and destroyed more than 2,200 structures when a small brush fire escaped containment and burned through the town to the shore in 2 hours.

Of these three examples, only one, the Camp Fire, involved forested land, much of which had been thinned or clear-cut.

The researchers analyzed fires "in the context of their speed and damage to homes … exploring the maximum single-day fire growth rate." Their report asserts, "Speed fundamentally dictates the deadly and destructive impact of megafires, rendering the prevailing paradigm that defines them by size inadequate. Fire speed matters more for infrastructure risk and evacuation planning…. Further, we know that fast fires occur when it is hot, dry, and windy…. Most of the area burned in extremely large events is from the growth on a single day, which is driven by extreme fire weather."

The report cites fundamental changes to fire-evolved ecosystems since colonial times — "fire suppression policies, logging, the proliferation of invasive species, climate change, and anthropogenic ignition patterns." Exacerbating the problem, residential development "has placed tens of millions of homes squarely into this contemporary fuel matrix … the wildland-urban interface (WUI). The rapid

**Table 1. Top 20 fastest-growing fires across the CONUS from 2001 to 2020.** Summary statistics describe the top 20 fastest fires from FIRED linked to their associated incident command system summary report (*44*). The top 20 fastest fires accrued an estimated $398 million in suppression costs alone, exposed 264,338 properties (within 4 km of a fire perimeter), and destroyed >9000 structures. Of the 20 fastest fires, 16 occurred primarily in grassland vegetation types (>50% grassland in burned area).

| Incident name | Year | State(s) | Fire size (ha) | Maximum fire growth (ha/day) | Duration (days) | Cost (US dollars) | Properties exposed (*n*) | Structures destroyed (*n*) | Total aerial units (*n*) | Total personnel (*n*) | Dominant vegetation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NW Oklahoma Complex | 2017 | OK, KS | 315,369 | 214,208 | 16 | 3,200,000 | 1647 | 151 | 2 | 955 | Grasslands |
| Long Draw | 2012 | OR | 225,664 | 129,911 | 14 | 4,360,000 | 2 | 0 | 49 | 4237 | Grasslands |
| Cold Springs Complex | 2020 | WA | 218,969 | 102,199 | 33 | 11,459,351 | 4907 | 288 | 34 | 4327 | Grasslands |
| Perryton | 2017 | TX | 128,753 | 100,911 | 14 | NR | 97 | 11 | 3 | 235 | Grasslands |
| Anderson Creek | 2016 | OK, KS | 148,819 | 81,420 | 19 | 1,750,000 | 1098 | 54 | 20 | 1183 | Grasslands |
| Murphy Complex | 2007 | ID | 263,862 | 70,150 | 30 | 13,000,000 | 21 | 3 | 56 | 10,443 | Grasslands |
| East Amarillo Complex | 2006 | TX | 367,149 | 60,770 | 23 | NR | 4821 | 89 | 6 | 702 | Grasslands |
| Martin | 2018 | NV | 176,269 | 59,246 | 20 | 8,500,000 | 0 | 1 | 97 | 2332 | Grasslands |
| Milford Flat | 2007 | UT | 146,922 | 58,258 | 16 | 5,050,000 | 112 | 2 | 25 | 4421 | Grasslands |
| Glass | 2008 | TX | 88,851 | 57,979 | 5 | NR | 1 | 0 | 8 | 56 | Grasslands |
| Buzzard Complex | 2014 | OR | 160,153 | 50,252 | 14 | 11,062,411 | 42 | 4 | 96 | 5265 | Grasslands |
| August Complex | 2020 | CA | 417,898 | 46,629 | 68 | 115,511,218 | 196 | 446 | 1153 | 63,814 | Evergreen needle-leaf forests |
| Kinyon Road | 2012 | ID | 85,338 | 47,461 | 12 | 1,625,000 | 57 | 0 | 18 | 1361 | Grasslands |
| Soda | 2015 | ID | 115,482 | 46,474 | 9 | 6,250,000 | 662 | 1 | 69 | 1706 | Grasslands |
| Rhea | 2018 | OK | 115,820 | 44,499 | 26 | 3,707,498 | 1669 | 32 | 62 | 941 | Grasslands |
| North Complex | 2020 | CA | 129,069 | 42,438 | 52 | 112,711,950 | 4607 | 2342 | 802 | 63,229 | Evergreen needle-leaf forests |
| Cedar | 2003 | CA | 110,579 | 41,408 | 18 | 32,616,213 | 132,444 | 2820 | 626 | 74,404 | Closed shrublands |
| Cooper Mountain Ranch | 2011 | TX | 65,812 | 39,969 | 13 | 1,194,159 | 740 | 0 | 8 | 854 | Grasslands |
| LNU Lightning Complex | 2020 | CA | 146,990 | 39,132 | 22 | 94,646,381 | 34,344 | 1479 | 354 | 36,601 | Grasslands |
| Witch-Poomacha | 2007 | CA | 80,124 | 38,639 | 19 | 18,000,000 | 76,871 | 1680 | 2 | 46,819 | Closed shrublands |

NR, not recorded.

***This table from Balch et al. lists the 20 fastest-growing wildfires in the Continental United States from 2001 to 2020. As shown in the rightmost column, only two of these fires burned in forests (Science 386, October 25, 2024.)***

expansion of this footprint has occurred largely without regard for wildfire risk, either through building policies or comprehensive community planning."

Other scientists, like Dr. Becky Kerns, are also weighing in on the risks from fast fire. Kerns is a research ecologist at the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Research Station in Oregon. As a subject-matter expert, she participated in a *Fire and Fuels Deep-Dive Science* webinar hosted this spring by the Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station. All five experts on the panel emphasized the importance of performing long-term maintenance to address revegetation in treatment areas. Fuel treatments, they agreed, are never a one-off event, and failure to perform regular fuel-reduction maintenance often leads to an increased level of fire hazard at former treatment sites.

"You may have a system where you do a really good job of reducing crown-fire potential or you've really altered the overstory," Kerns said, "but now you have a lot of finer fuels that are coming in. So, you've lowered crown-fire potential, but now you have fine fuels…. The classic example, of course, is an invasive annual grass coming in after your fuel treatment."

Kerns noted that fuel treatments in piñon-juniper forests are especially concerning, given the liklihood of post-treatment infestation from invasive annual grasses. "Any sort of treatments or fuel breaks where you start having a lot of invasion ... can create a fast-fire situation…. Even though you might actually bring fire down to the ground and not have a crown fire, it could just rip through that break or that treatment if you have a lot of invasion…. The issues around invasives, particularly annual grasses, are really concerning around WUIs because it's a fast-fire issue. You're just going to bring that fire potentially up to the WUI, and that is concerning."

As the Balch report demonstrates, the "lack of attention to fire growth is a critical risk assessment gap, particularly given the rapid expansion of the WUI into areas with the greatest probability of wildfire and the mechanisms by which most homes burn. We know that the primary mechanism for home ignition is firebrands propelled ahead of the flaming front that land on flammable materials attached to, on, or inside the structure and ultimately consume it."

The authors emphasize three implications of their work:

1. They define what constitutes "fast fire."
2. They demonstrate that fires are growing ever faster, particularly in the Western U.S.
3. They show that grassland fires are particularly dangerous.

Based on their definition of fast fire, the authors "delineate a new class of the fastest growing and most destructive fires" based on a growth rate of 4,000 acres or more per day.

Fires that grow this quickly destroy most of the structures lost to wildfire each year (78%) and generate the highest suppression costs (61%). The authors determined, "There is a strong relationship between growth rate and burned area; growth is the fundamental mechanism driving final event size." The authors also "quantify that the fastest-growing fires are in grassland systems, where more homes have been destroyed relative to forest wildfires."

In summary, fast fires are the biggest threat to lives and communities, and the fastest-growing fires occur in grasslands. Therefore, the small percentage of forest wildfires that produce crown fires is rarely, if ever, a legitimate rationale for wildfire-mitigation logging.

*Fanned by 100-mph winds, the 2021 Marshall Fire in Colorado burned through grasslands and subdivisions to become the most destructive fire in Colorado history (NOAA photo by Patrick Cullis).*

Black Mountain Hotshots get briefed prior to hiking into the Slink Fire on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in California (Forest Service photo by Charity Parks).

Guest Column

# U.S. Wildland Fire Service

## *'Like Trying to Fly a Plane While You're Building It'*

*by Timothy Ingalsbee*

The airplane metaphor has become a common theme in conversations among wildland firefighters describing the U.S. Wildland Fire Service (WFS). President Trump issued Executive Order 14308 mandating consolidation of federal wildfire programs, and the new agency is the product of that executive order, which seeks to combine fire programs in five different federal agencies across two Cabinet-level departments. The order set a deadline of 90 days for the agencies to complete consolidation. A year later, during a record-setting wildfire year, federal fire consolidation is far from complete.

So far, only firefighters from the Department of Interior have been pulled into the WFS. The much larger Forest Service Fire Program has managed to avoid integration into the WFS after the administration begrudgingly acknowledged that it will require Congressional action to transfer the program and its personnel out of the Ag Department's Forest Service into the Interior Department's WFS. But with 70% or more of federal firefighting personnel and resources, the Forest Service still leads the field in fire management.

The consolidation order, issued during peak wildfire season, was at first dismissed as a public relations stunt, the wildfire version of Trump's Space Force — "Fire Force." But in the context of the administration's open hostility toward federal employees, it quickly became apparent that fire consolidation was a potential means of defunding agencies and downsizing the federal workforce. This was made especially clear on the heels of Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency operation, which forced out thousands of Forest Service employees, many with wildland firefighting credentials.

Creating the WFS has been a top-down, highly centralized "black box" operation at the highest levels of the Interior Secretary's Office. Independent experts and key stakeholders — states, tribes, nongovernmental organizations — have not been allowed to provide input. Even Congress has received very little information. As a result, Congress refused Trump's funding request for the new agency, which would have handed over all funding for the Forest Service's Wildland Fire Program (in the Department of Agriculture) to the WFS (in the Interior Department).

Congress did approve funding for an independent study of the effects of transferring the Forest Service Wildfire Program into Interior. At the time of this writing, the study had not even started. The lack of a study has not deterred the Trump administration from hiring a

*The Little T Hotshots, based at the Angeles National Forest, assist with pile burning on the Stanislaus National Forest (Forest Service photo by Benjamin Cossel).*

WFS executive officer, transferring thousands of government employees, launching a branding campaign, and otherwise spending tax dollars despite congressional apprehension.

The Forest Service remains the big prize and real target of fire consolidation. Once again, the administration's current draft of the 2027 Appropriations Bill proposes defunding the Forest Service Fire Program and giving that money to the WFS. Taken in context, consolidation must be seen as yet another punitive measure specifically targeting the Forest Service. Nothing will hurt the Forest Service more than taking away its fire program, which currently comprises approximately half of the agency's staffing and funding. Removing all fire-related programs and personnel from the Forest Service could very well demolish the agency.

Even the agency's critics view fire consolidation and Forest Service reorganization as sabotaging effective management of public lands. Conservationists have long complained about the way the Forest Service links timber and fire programs by labeling timber sales as "pre-fire thinning," "post-fire salvage logging," or "hazardous fuels reduction." Yet even conservationists oppose consolidation, seeing it as an effort to gut the Forest Service and privatize or transfer its functions by eliminating the government's largest professional firefighting workforce.

Even with limited WFS implementation, there are legitimate concerns about an agency not only disconnected from local landscapes and community values, but also devoid of an explicit conservation mission. Severing fire management from land management represents half of the threat. The real danger comes from limiting fire management to wildfire suppression in fire-evolved ecosystems. The contradictions are inherent: short-sighted wildfire suppression and exclusion vs. ecological fire management for ecosystem restoration and long-term sustainability.

The WFS has yet to articulate its mission, but there are significant differences in the missions of the four Interior agencies that now comprise the WFS. The BLM conducts aggressive initial fire suppression on nearly all wildfires while the Park Service opts to manage wildfires for ecosystem benefits whenever possible. Adding in the Forest Service's "multiple fire use" practices — full suppression vs. prescribed burning vs. managed natural fires — across its widely divergent landscapes adds further complexity to the question: Whose fire management philosophy will govern the new agency?

Currently, the question is moot because both the Agriculture and Interior secretaries have issued directives requiring full suppression on every wildfire on federal lands for the entirety of 2026. It remains to be seen whether this attack-all-fires policy continues for the duration of the Trump administration. But given that this retrogressive fire policy prevails during the birth and infancy of the WFS, total fire suppression could come to define the new agency's mission, culture, and identity, much like policies adopted in the wake of The Big Blowup of 1910.

The working relationship between the WFS and federal land-management agencies is another big question. General wisdom suggests that the WFS should function according to a "contractor" model, providing fire-management services under the authority of the land-management agency, e.g., the National Park Service. But a recent internal document titled "Transition Guidance" reveals that the WFS will operate as the dominant "partner" — the WFS will act as agency administrator, making all operational decisions for both wildfires and prescribed fires on federal lands.

Land-management officials will be relegated to submissive advisory roles.

In essence, the WFS can usurp the authority of agency officials and use or ignore existing land management plans as it wishes. The Trump administration has established this hierarchical relationship among agencies within the Interior Department, but questions remain about the relations and authority between the WFS and the Forest Service, which continues to command the majority of wildfire-prone lands and fire-management resources.

Consolidating all federal fire management within a narrowly structured firefighting agency will adversely impact all federal agencies and public lands. Forget managing wildfires for resource benefits, wilderness ethics, forest resilience, wildlife habitat, or other common-sense fire management goals. The WFS will become an instrument for the Trump administration's efforts to restore resource extraction as the dominant use of national forests and bolster the supremacy of obsolescent fire-suppression policy as the dominant form of fire management.

These concerns and criticisms merit thoughtful analysis, open discussion, and respectful debate among all fire- and land-management stakeholders. Charging forward with an unfunded restructuring mandate seems a lot like a skirmish designed to distract from more strategic battles. In fact, the wildland fire community has been talking strategically about a consolidated federal fire-management agency for some time. Fire professionals suffering under the thumbs of risk-averse, fire-antagonistic line officers have pondered creating a separate fire management agency.

Thier ideal fire agency would utilize the best available ecological science and advanced technology to work with fire instead of constantly fighting against it. This new agency would have a stewardship ethos that supports a conservation mission and nurtures a workforce of high-value, high-skill, high-status public servants. With this vision, consolidation would accompany a larger transformation in society's relationship with the land as well as the fire that sustains the land. Since the Forest Service holds the majority of fire-management resources, its ability to weather the headwinds of consolidation will impact the success or failure of all other agencies' fire programs.

Plenty of members of the wildland fire community have been frustrated for years by the inability of the Forest Service to reform itself. Given their frustration, it should come as no surprise that they see the potential for a positive outcome of the WFS consolidation as a blunt instrument of institutional change — a change empowered by a future conservation-minded administration that respects science and democracy in government policy. The WFS could live up to this ideal, but its current attack-all-fires mandate rejects fire ecology and could be catastrophic.

Launched by a flawed administration with highly questionable intentions, this new fire agency is here. Despite misgivings about its origins, two facts must be recognized:

1. There are thousands of courageous WFS firefighters toiling on the fire lines doing their very best to succeed.
2. The Trump administration uncharacteristically appointed someone skilled, experienced, competent, and caring to lead the agency.

Acknowledging these two facts brings a sense of hope and highlights the necessity of supporting the women and men of the WFS.

WFS Chief Brian Fennessy has demonstrated an earnest desire to lead the agency to success and enjoys widespread respect among firefighters. There are serious questions about how much leeway the administration will allow him, but he seems to be doing his best with the decision space he's been given. So, despite all of the justified concerns about the intent and outcome of fire consolidation, supporters of public lands must support the WFS workforce, especially with this year's dangerous conditions.

It's likely too late to ground this half-built plane as it careens down the runway, but for the sake of its crew of dedicated firefighters and its passenger manifest of local community members, we must do whatever we can to prevent it from crashing and then steer it in a safer direction, navigating by conservation values. The best approach for those who care about the fate of national forests is to slow-walk further consolidation efforts while demanding that the congressionally funded study be completed.

Bottom line: there should be no consolidation without transformation of fire programs and policies across the federal government toward a mission of working with, rather than against, fire ecology.

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# Briefly

*Smoke billows from the 2025 La Plata Fire in Colorado.*

## *Wildfire Research and Response Face Uncertain Future*

As communities across the western United States endure a severe wildfire season following an unusually dry winter, the research that supports wildfire response is being threatened. Over the past several decades, federally funded scientists have developed tools that improve wildfire forecasting, smoke modeling, and fire management.

For example, the real-time wildfire smoke maps now used by governments, firefighting teams, commercial apps, and the public were developed through years of research at the Pacific Wildland Fire Sciences Laboratory in Seattle. However, the Seattle lab is among 57 of 77 Forest Service research stations identified for closure or consolidation under the agency's proposed reorganization.

Researchers warn that, as wildfires become more frequent and severe, reducing federal investment in wildfire science could erode decades of expertise and weaken the nation's ability to prepare for and respond to future fires.

*The summit of Mount Arvon is the highest point in Michigan. New protections will ensure that this forest is allowed to return to old-growth status.*

## *Michigan Conservation Easement Supports Old Growth*

Typically, when conservationists talk about old-growth forests, they focus on protecting forests that have already reached that stage. In Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a new conservation easement takes a different approach by protecting a forest so it can naturally develop old-growth characteristics.

Backed by more than $20 million in federal, state, and private funding, the easement protects 73,000 acres of working forest across three counties, including Mt. Arvon, Michigan's highest peak. The easement establishes a permanent no-cut buffer around the summit to allow the forest to mature naturally, while allowing sustainable timber harvests elsewhere on the property.

The forest will continue to provide timber and local jobs, permanent public access for recreation, and protected habitat for species that include moose, coaster brook trout, and the northern long-eared bat. At the same time, the summit of Michigan's highest peak will be left to grow into an old-growth forest.

*Morning sunbeams filter through deciduous trees of a northern forest.*

## *Canadian Town Grants Legal Rights to Trees*

In June, Terrasse-Vaudreuil, a town in Quebec, Canada,became the first municipality in the world to sign on to the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Tree*, which was drafted in 2018 and revised in 2019.

The Declaration proclaims three fundamental principles:

- Article 1: The Tree, a sentient living being and a source of Life, is a common good of humanity.
- Article 2: Life on the planet depends on the existence of the Tree.
- Article 3: Humankind, endowed with reason and conscience, must act with the Tree in a spirit of fraternity and solidarity.

Town Mayor Michel Bourdeau attributed Quebec filmmaker André Desrochers with inspiring the communities to act. He said Desrochers' film, *Des arbes et des arts* (*The Art of Trees*) convinced local residents that trees are living entities that breathe and communicate with each other through their root systems.

"A tree is like a human being," Bourdeau said. "It breathes, it lives, it takes in water. It protects us from all sorts of things."

# Dispatch

## Roadless Rule Rescission Threatens Vital Ecosystems

*An old logging road on national forest land in Montana continues to degrade the forest ecosystem through erosion (photo by Greg Munther).*

A new report in *Biological Conservation* concludes, "The justifications for rescinding the Roadless Rule are fiscally misguided and ecologically flawed." Coauthors David Mildrexler, Logan Berner, Beverly Law, and Mary Booth write that the rescission would endanger "irreplaceable intact forest landscapes in the U.S.," landscapes that "are part of a global network of intact forests vital to regional and planetary health."

The Forest Service issued the Roadless Area Conservation Rule and designated the first inventoried roadless areas in 2001, almost 40 years after Congress passed the 1964 Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act directed the secretary of Agriculture to review national forest lands for wilderness potential and to make recommendations "regarding the suitability of those lands for wilderness designation."

Since the 1920s, the Forest Service has inventoried undeveloped areas and managed them to preserve their natural qualities. As described on the Congressional website, two attempts by the Forest Service to inventory national forest lands under the Wilderness Act were blocked, and management of these lands was limited through legal action. Eventually, "Congress intervened to legislatively address the reviewed areas, such as by designating them as wilderness or returning them to multiple-use management."

The rule's main purpose was to protect the nation's collective roadless area resources from the destructive impacts of roads and timber harvesting. Following various rounds of litigation and three separate rulemakings, inventoried roadless areas and their management have been defined. Roadless area characteristics include:

- High-quality or undisturbed soil, water, or air.
- Plant and animal diversity.
- Sources of public drinking water.

Road reconstruction and timber harvesting are generally prohibited. Ag Secretary Brooke Rollins' rulemaking to rescind the Roadless Rule has met stiff resistance — over 600,000 public comments with 99% opposing the rescission. Utah Sen. Mike Lee is attempting to bypass the rulemaking process by adding a rescission rider to the Wildfire Prevention Act, which has advanced to the Senate floor.

The Mildrexler report stresses the significance of intact forests, which "provide globally significant ecosystem services to humanity…. To maintain these services, it is crucial to protect intact forests from road building and other types of anthropogenic degradation. In the U.S., some of the most important intact forests were designated as Inventoried Roadless Areas," which "have among the highest integrity forests in the nation."

A major argument posed for removing roadless-area designations is wildfire prevention and suppression. But as the Mildrexler team notes, building roads into roadless areas will not only degrade forest ecosystem functions, it will also increase fire risk. The rescission will also be "grossly uneconomic, especially given the Forest Service's current $10.8 billion backlog in deferred maintenance," a huge chunk of which stems from "a century of intensive logging" that produced more than 386,000 miles of roads on national forests.

"This massive road system," they write, "contributes to reductions in the quality and quantity of water, habitat fragmentation, spread of invasive plants, increased wildfire risk, and other problems that undermine ecological integrity." Considering these impacts, roadless areas have far more value remaining roadless.

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# Contact Your Senators

***Tell them to 'Stop the Fix Our Forests Act.'***

**The corporate logging lobby is mounting a massive assault on public lands. The Fix Our Forests Act (S. 1462) is heading toward a full Senate vote.**

**S. 1462 uses wildfire anxiety as a smokescreen while stripping away core environmental protections to:**

- **Silence your voice by restricting the window for public comment and legal oversight.**
- **Fast-track 10,000-acre logging projects with no environmental review.**
- **Gut the Endangered Species Act's critical protections for imperiled wildlife and plants.**

**Call the Congressional switchboard to connect with your senators' offices: 202-224-3121 or visit senate.gov/senators/contact to send an email.**

*Clear-cut patches of Douglas-fir forest in Washington.*

**Scan this QR code to support FSEEE:**