



# Washington's Forest Management Vision

## *Growing Healthier Forests*

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By Kirstin Gruver

**A**lthough forest practices have changed significantly in recent years, many argue that historical forest practices, combined with climate changes, have led to the current reality of unmanageable wildfires and unhealthy forests. The cultural underpinnings of modern fire suppression tactics and the public's perception of wildfire are discussed in depth in "A New Angle on Wildfire" at page 24. This article will focus on the effects of these countervailing approaches on the health of the forests themselves.

### **FIRE SUPPRESSION AS FOREST MANAGEMENT**

In the early 1900s, forest fires were a regular and normal occurrence. Small wildfires occurred "every five or 10 years, mostly—small fires that consumed grass and shrubs and small seedlings, but left the big Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir just fine."<sup>1</sup> Fire created the conditions that allowed trees that require extreme heat to reproduce to be able to do so. The burning of shrubs and small bushes kept the understory clear, thus reducing the amount of fodder and tinder for a later fire to burn. As a result, there were only a few dozen trees per acre.<sup>2</sup>

But forest management changed after 1910, which saw some of the largest wildfires in U.S. history. As a result, the U.S. Forest Service instituted a policy of complete fire suppression.<sup>3</sup> Despite knowing that many trees, such as the lodgepole pine, require extreme heat to reproduce, the Forest Service and its rangers actively worked to suppress wildfires.<sup>4</sup> Total fire suppression was intended to prevent future fires, and suppressing a fire as quickly as possible was the goal.<sup>5</sup>

Fire suppression has, however, led to overcrowded forests. With a significant share of the Forest Service's expenditures going toward wildfire suppression alone—about half of the total expenditures in fiscal year 2016 and more than one-fifth in fiscal year 2017—there is little funding left for forest management or restoration.<sup>6</sup> Forests are no longer appropriately thinned; instead they are choked with spindly trees, shrubs, and bushes. All of this translates to one thing: fuel for wildfires.<sup>7</sup> According to Craig Allen, a fire manager with the Forest Service in New

Mexico, forests today average about 900 trees per acre.<sup>8</sup> By comparison, historical forests averaged about 40 trees per acre.<sup>9</sup>

The effects of fire suppression and its associated forest management practices have also decreased forest vitality. Overstocked forests, coupled with increasing droughts, have increased competition among trees for moisture, which means that trees are less resistant to wildfires, insects, and disease.<sup>10</sup> As a result, tree mortality rates associated with insects and disease have increased significantly.<sup>11</sup>

### **"LET-BURN" POLICY**

Beginning around the 1970s, the Forest Service implemented a "let-burn" policy.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the Forest Service allows prescribed fires to burn in certain places. These controlled burns are intended to improve overall forest health and mitigate the spread of wildfires by eliminating low shrubs and grasses, which act as tinder for spreading fires. Prescribed burns are also used to limit the ferocity of wildfires in an attempt to mitigate complete destruction of the forest ecosystem.

"The choice is not whether or not these forests burn," U.S. Forest Service Fire Manager William Armstrong told NPR. "The choice is how they burn. What kind of intensity are we going to see those burn at?"<sup>13</sup>

Not everyone, however, embraces the "let-burn" policy. Over the past decade, many people have built homes or vacation cabins on or near forest land. Around 20 million people now live within a few miles of a national forest.<sup>14</sup> Residents in these areas are concerned that prescribed burns will get out of control and lead to larger fires.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, residents complain about the smoke. The countervailing argument is that if forests can be managed in a way that increases space between trees, thereby reducing fuel, then risk to structures near forestland is lessened.

The current reality is that many fires become so large that they cannot be stopped. They jump from tree crown to tree crown, obliterating everything in their path, scarring the land,


and destroying the soil. These fires “convert something that’s like a sponge to Saran Wrap,” Armstrong said in another NPR story on wildfire.<sup>16</sup> In the aftermath of such a wildfire, with nothing left to soak up the rain, water surges down the mountain, collecting ash, tree trunks, and other debris, and creates more devastation.<sup>17</sup>

The challenge today is finding and implementing forest management practices that not only mitigate wildfires, but rehabilitate our forests.

### WASHINGTON’S FOREST MANAGEMENT VISION

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimates that 2.7 million acres of forestland in Eastern Washington need treatment to become more resilient to insects, disease, and wildfire.<sup>18</sup> In response to the current state of Washington’s forestland, the DNR introduced the “20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan.”<sup>19</sup> The plan has five goals:

1. “[C]onduct 1.25 million acres of scientifically sound, landscape-scale, cross-boundary management and restoration treatments in priority watersheds to increase forest and watershed resilience by 2037.”<sup>20</sup>
2. “Reduce risk of uncharacteristic wildfire and other disturbances to help protect lives, communities, property, ecosystems, assets, and working forests.”<sup>21</sup>
3. “Enhance economic development through implementation of forest restoration and management strategies that maintain and attract private sector investments and employment in rural communities.”<sup>22</sup>
4. “Plan and implement coordinated, landscape-scale forest restoration and management treatments in a manner that integrates landowner objectives and responsibilities.”<sup>23</sup>
5. “Develop and implement a forest health resilience monitoring program that establishes criteria, tools and processes to monitor forest and watershed conditions, assess progress and reassess strategies over time.”<sup>24</sup>

Washington has taken important steps toward implementing forest management practices that can reverse centuries of mismanagement and revitalize Washington forests. It will take time and a significant amount of money, but proactive forest management will benefit Washington state, its communities, and its forests. 



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### NOTES

1. Christopher Joyce, “How the Smokey Bear Effect Led to Raging Wildfire,” National Public Radio, August 23, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/23/159373691/how-the-smokey-bear-effect-led-to-raging-wildfires>.
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3. U.S. Forest Service Fire Suppression, Forest History Society, <https://foresthistor.org/research-explore/us-forest-service-history/policy-and-law/fire-u-s-forest-service/u-s-forest-service-fire-suppression/>; “The Big Burn” Timothy Egan, 2009; “Teddy Roosevelt and the ‘Burn’ That Saved Forests,” National Public Radio, Author Interviews, David Bianculli, September 10, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=129750575>.
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6. Washington Department of Natural Resources. 2017 Annual Report. Total Expenditures FY 2017 at pg. 9. [https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/em\\_annual\\_report\\_2017.pdf?pahk4](https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/em_annual_report_2017.pdf?pahk4)
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9. “How the Smokey Bear Effect Led to Raging Wildfire,” *supra* note 1.
10. 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan: Eastern Washington, Washington State department of Natural Resources, 2018.
11. *Id.*
12. U.S. Forest Service Fire Suppression, Forest History Society, *supra* note 3
13. “How the Smokey Bear Effect Led to Raging Wildfire,” *supra* note 1.
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.*
16. “Is it Too Late to Defuse the Danger of Megafires?” *supra* note 8.
17. *Id.*
18. 20-Year Forest Health Strategic Plan: Eastern Washington, *supra* note 10.
19. *Id.*
20. *Id.*
21. *Id.*
22. *Id.*
23. *Id.*
24. *Id.*