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Slash, so the Forest Doesn't Burn

By Daniel Simmons

The fire in and around Los Alamos, New Mexico demonstrates the failure of federal forest management policies. The real failure in Los Alamos was not the egregious error of lighting a prescribed burn in dangerous conditions, but rather years of federal forest mismanagement that allowed excessive amounts of "fuel" to accumulate. Experimentation in Colorado's forests, however, shows that mechanically removing excess fuels can "fireproof" the forest against catastrophic forest fire, therefore protecting the forest from fire tragedies like Los Alamos.

For most of the last century, federal forest policies have dictated putting out fires as soon as they start. The problem with these policies is that fire is a natural part of forest ecosystems. Historically, ponderosa pine forests burned every 5 to 15 years from fires started either by lightning or by Native Americans. These frequent fires burned at low intensities, clearing the underbrush and keeping the forest more open. With open forests, fires remained on the ground and did not climb into the tree canopy and kill the large trees.

By suppressing fire, federal forests have become unnaturally dense with large amounts of underbrush. Before fire suppression efforts took their toll, ponderosa pines grew in open stands with densities between 20 and 55 trees per acre. Now, they frequently grow in densities in excess of 1,000 trees per acre, creating a great fire hazard. Currently, 40 million acres of federally managed forest are too dense and are at risk of burning.

As Los Alamos demonstrates, there are great costs when these forests burn. The fire forced 20,000 people to evacuate, burned 220 homes, left 400 families homeless, and caused an estimated $1 billion in damage. Besides the human costs, the fire damaged the environment, charring over 47,000 acres, destroying animal and plant habitats, and spoiling a beautiful forest. The fire released millions of pounds of pollution into the atmosphere, creating massive air quality effects.

According to the EPA, wildfire produces about 5,700 pounds of carbon monoxide from each acre burned. So, the 47,000 acres that burned in Los Alamos produced as much carbon monoxide as 530 million cars idling for one hour in the summer.

Prescribed burns always run the risk of escaping control and damaging people, wildlife, forests, and air quality. Losing control of a prescribed burn is very likely after decades of fuel build up. But, forest managers can mechanically remove excess fuels and improve the likelihood of controlling prescribed burns.

Mechanically removing dead, diseased timber and underbrush reduces the risk of catastrophic forest fire. The Denver Water Board, for example, is working

with Louisiana Pacific Corp., Perry Brandt Logging, Colorado State University, the Colorado State Forest Service, and the National Park Service on a project to mechanically remove excess fuels and restore forest health at Cheesman Reservoir and south of Deckers. This project is designed to "fireproof" the forest by removing excess fuels and returning the forest to its pre-fire suppression state.

But the option of mechanical removal appears increasingly at odds with the federal government's policies. In the very same week as the Los Alamos fire, the Forest Service announced a new moratorium on road building on 43 million acres of national forests. This moratorium limits forest management by making timber harvesting all but impossible (imagine trying to remove excess timber without roads). This continues the trend of limiting timber production. Since 1989, harvest levels in forests have fallen from 12 billion board feet per year to less than 4 billion today.

Colorado deserves better than failed federal forest policies. Not only does the federal government own and mismanage more than one third of Colorado, but the new road building moratorium will compound the disastrous effects of decades of gross mismanagement. As the Denver Water Board shows, local solutions will develop to solve difficult forest health problems. To further protect Colorado's forest health, and air quality – as well as the lives and property surrounding forestland – mechanically removing of excess fuels is a necessity. If we do not allow such local solutions to emerge and continue to put a dangerous and ineffective policy above common sense, Colorado may be the next victim of a disastrous fire like Los Alamos.

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