

The politics of smoke (version for SAFE), June 10, 2009

by Felice Pace

Last summer hundreds of thousands of Northern California residents were exposed to smoke at levels which constitute a serious health hazard. On the Klamath River two elders passed on during this time. Both elders had health problems; but locals believe smoke exposure sealed their fate. Doctors agree that exposure to smoke can cause acute discomfort including headaches, sinus and respiratory problems and depression. Extended exposure causes or contributes to chronic health problems which often do not surface for many years.

Generations of rural westerners have accepted these impacts; we've assume that the smoke is from natural fires and therefore that nothing can be done to reduce it. But the reality is more complex.

How much of last summer's choking smoke was the result of wildfires and how much was the result of deliberately torched *burn outs* and *back fires*? The Forest Service does not provide this information. But even if a lot of the smoke resulted from fires intentionally set by the Forest Service isn't this necessary to stop the wildfires from sweeping into our communities? Not necessarily.

During Northwest California's Megram Fire (Big Bar Complex) in 1999 high winds pushed fire toward Hoopa and Willow Creek. At the time everyone assumed the firestorm was the natural fire. Later analysis revealed that fire was not natural; it was lit by the Forest Service. The natural Megram Fire never got anywhere near firelines or the *burn out* that threatened Hoopa and Willow Creek. As with every large fire that has burned in the Klamath Mountains since 1987, it was fall rains – not firefighting – which put the fire out.

Forest Service *burn outs* and *back burns* are ordered by firefighting commanders unfamiliar with the Klamath Mountains and approved by local managers who also are mostly transplants. These outsiders assume fighting fire here is like fighting fire where they come from. It is not. Old timers and those who have fire fighting experience here know that *burn outs* and *back fires* in the Klamath Mountains are crap shoots; if conditions change – and they do! – a *burn out* or *back fire* can quickly become more of a problem than the natural fires. Furthermore *burn outs* in the Klamath Mountains since 1987 have almost always burned at higher intensity as compared to the natural forest fires they were set to control. *Burn outs* and *back fires* have resulted in watershed and habitat damage that could have been avoided if firefighting commanders and Forest Service managers had been more prudent.

Old timers know that in this landscape the best strategy is to “loose herd” fires in the backcountry while concentrating fire fighting resources where they can do good - in the front country where people live. But rotating firefighting commanders whom the Forest Service imports to fight our fires rarely listen to old timers. More often their attitude is that they are the professionals and that local yokels don't understand modern fire fighting. Forest Service managers are loath to disagree with professional firefighting commanders.

So what is to be done? How can we get the run-amok Forest Service fire fighting bureaucracy under control?

For one thing we can put pressure on local air pollution officials. Because natural fires result in air quality which exceeds standards, the Forest Service must get variances from air pollution rules in order to light their *burn outs* and *back fires*. The variances are given by county officials without question. Given the track record of Forest Service *burn outs* in the Klamath Mountains, however, air quality officials may be unnecessarily exposing citizens to health hazards.

We can also pressure our regional water boards to develop and impose fire fighting *best management practices* designed to protect water quality from degradation resulting from inappropriate and excessive use of aggressive fire suppression actions. We do not want to tie firefighters' hands but we do want them to think about water quality when they make suppression decisions. The practice of putting mini-clearcut rest camps and heli-spots right next to rivers and streams – as well as the practice of opening decommissioned salmon-killing roads – should be discouraged if not banned outright.

Congress can be encouraged to reduce funding for the national firefighting bureaucracy and to transfer some of those funds to local fire companies whose members know the terrain and local fire behavior. Local firefighters are likely to be sensitive to health risks as compared to non-local fire commanders.

We can demand that the Forest Service map and display *burn outs* and *back fires* as distinct from natural wildfires. If firefighting commanders are forced to cop to the damage they cause they will think twice before setting the large – and unnecessary – *burn outs* and *back fires* we saw last summer and many times before.

Finally, we can band together with rural residents across the West to pressure the Obama Administration to adopt a sensible policy for wildland fire suppression. Such an approach would include directing the federal firefighting bureaucracy to “loose herd” wildfires in backcountry while aggressively suppressing fires in front country. Such a policy could go a long way toward reducing the ballooning cost of fire suppression.

In 1999 we dodged a bullet when Hoopa and Willow Creek were spared. But one of these years a Forest Service *burn out* or *back fire* is going to get out of control and destroy a community. If that happens lawsuits from burned out residents could follow. Is that what it will take to get the Forest Service bureaucracy to realize that in the Klamath Mountains their fire suppression cure may be more damaging - and more dangerous - than the natural fires?

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