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To the editor:

Keepers of the Flame, the excellent feature article in the November 8th edition, described the key element needed for a rational, realistic, socially and ecologically responsible public land fire policy. That element is managers who have an intimate, personal knowledge of the land on which they are working and how fire behaves in that landscape.

Unfortunately, local people are not allowed to manage most western public land fires. Instead the bloated, fire bureaucracy takes over with "incident commanders" who have no knowledge of local conditions and local fire history. These foreign managers inevitably impose their predilection for wasteful military-style suppression tactics. The result is large fires that consume tens of millions of dollars but which fail to put out the fires.

In reality, it is often the suppression tactics themselves which cause the most ecological damage. For example, in the massive Big Bar Fires of 1999 on the Trinity and Six Rivers National Forests, the "burnouts" made by massive logging helicopters armed with "helitorches" amounted to at least 25% of the fire area including much of the land the burned at high intensity. Like so many of the West's massively expensive big fires, the Big Bar fire was not suppressed. Only the coming of fall rain ended both the fire and the waste of money and resources to which the fire bureaucracy has become addicted.

Keepers of the Flame ought to be the first in a series of articles examining the practice of fire management and suppression on the West's public lands. Future features should investigate why we continue to waste hundreds of millions of dollars each year on ineffective large fire suppression. Thorough investigation will reveal the influence of equipment contractors and logging companies which harvest windfall profits from the massive suppression boondoggles. Only when westerner taxpayers understand the waste and corruption that pervade the fire suppression bureaucracy will they demand a return to fire management by dedicated, local people who know the land and who have no vested interest in massively wasteful and ineffective suppression mobilizations.

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