The politics of smoke
by Felice Pace

Hundreds of thousands of Northern California residents are currently being exposed to smoke at levels which constitute a serious health hazard. Immediate impacts include recurring headaches, sinus and respiratory problems and depression. Extended exposure will also contribute to serious health problems which will not surface for many years.

Local residents accept these impacts; we assume 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 the smoke is the result of wildfires and how much is the result of deliberately torched "burn outs"? The Forest Service does not provide this information. But even if a lot of the smoke is the result of fires intentionally set by the Forest Service isn't this necessary to stop the wildfires from sweeping into our communities? Not necessarily.

During the Megram Fire in 1999 high winds pushed fire toward Hoopa and Willow Creek. At the time most residents assumed the firestorm was the natural fire. Later analysis revealed it was lit by the Forest Service. The natural Megram Fire never got near the firelines or the "burn out" that threatened Hoopa and Willow Creek. As with every large fire that has burned in the Klamath Backcountry, it was fall rains – not firefighting – which put the fire out.

Forest Service "burn outs" are ordered by fire managers unfamiliar with the Klamath Mountains. These outsiders assume fighting fire here is like fighting fire where they come from. It is not. Old timers and those with local fire fighting experience know that "burn outs" in the Klamath Mountains are crap shoots; if conditions change they can quickly become more of a problem than the natural fires.

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 the rotating "managers" whom the Forest Service imports to fight our fires rarely listen to old timers. More often their attitude is that they are the professionals; they think the local yokels don't understand modern fire fighting.

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." These variances are given by county officials without question. Given the track record of Forest Service "burn outs" in the Klamath Mountains, however, officials may be unnecessarily exposing citizens to health hazards.

In 1999 we dodged a bullet when Hoopa and Willow Creek were spared. But one of these years a Forest Service "burn out" 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?

Felice Pace has lived in the Klamath Mountains since 1975. Since 1987 he has walked and studied all the large fires that have burned in the Klamath Mountains.