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To TRT editors,

Malcolm Terence;s report "post Fire Season Recap" in the November 3rd edition contains lessons which all who live in the fire-prone West would do well to learn. Only when our communities are educated about the realities of fires in western national forests will they be in a position to demand that Forest Service managers and the Firefighting Bureaucracy abandon their expensive, damaging and destructive suppression strategies and tactics.

The TRT article focused on the 2015 Nikowitz Fire. In spite of burning in an area "thick with live and dead vegetation" the Nikowitz Fire burned overwhelmingly at low intensity. District Ranger Nolan Colegrove attributed that to "marine influences" and a "smoke inversion". In other words, it was climate and weather, not fuel, which determined how the Nikowitz Fire burned.

The same is true for most western wildfires: weather, not fuel, usually determines how intensely a fire burns. That means the dominant Forest Service strategy of scattering fuel reduction projects across the landscape and far from communities is a waste of money. The practice appears more motivated by a desire to remove trees than by a desire to protect communities.

Under the leadership of Merve George Junior, the Six Rivers National Forest is moving in a different direction. The Western Klamath Restoration Partnership promises to place fuel reduction projects strategically so that communities are protected and broad firebreaks are created on major ridges and along major roads. The idea is that, once those things are accomplished, managers like George and Colegrove can feel more confident allowing natural wildfires to play a more natural role in our forests. By burning strategically in the traditional manner developed over the ages by Indigenous Natives, cultural resources can be restored at the same time community protection is maximized.

As Forest Supervisor Merve George stated at the debrief, "we are not there yet." For one thing, the Western Klamath Partnership has yet to roll out a major project so it has not yet demonstrated that Forest Service managers can restrain an organization which has been focused for so long on "getting out the cut" no matter what the consequences. The agency also has yet to demonstrate that it will reward innovators like George rather than those who can produce the most timber delivered to lumber mills.

Another impediment to allowing fire to play a more natural role in our forests is the lack of a fire plan that endorses that approach. Forest Service managers are still obligated, for example, to actively suppress all human-caused fires even when those fires do not threaten communities and could be beneficial if allowed to burn.

A regional fire plan designed to protect communities, control runaway suppression costs and lessen fire suppression damage to our watersheds would be a major aide to managers like George and would deliver a message to other nearby forest supervisors that the practice of using

wildfires as an excuse for creating hundreds of miles of linear clearcuts that are then salvage logged will no longer be tolerated.

The recently completed national fire strategy supports restoring fire to a more natural role in western forests. But that is just words on paper. A regional fire plan to implement the strategy would show that this time the Forest Service intends to walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

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