

Experts fear backlash on prescribed forest fires

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The National Park Service had good intentions when it lit prescribed burns to restore and remove dangerous accumulations of forest fuels at the Grand Canyon and New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico.

But high spring winds fanned both controlled burns into raging wildfires with destructive results.

More than 200 homes were lost in Los Alamos and the fire has consumed more than 47,000 acres. The Grand Canyon fire has burned more than 14,000 acres and caused the closure of campgrounds, lodges and other facilities.

Forest restoration experts are worried that a public backlash against prescribed fires will delay or cripple ambitious plans to revitalize millions of acres of unhealthy Southwest forests.

"The problems in these forests aren't going to go away. We have to work in the forest to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire and return the forest to a more natural condition," said Brad Ack of Grand Canyon Trust, a Flagstaff-based conservation group.

"If we back away now, we will put ourselves at the mercy of natural forces. Fire is part of this landscape and if they are not prescribed, they are going to be wild and the wild ones are far more dangerous," he added.

Every two to eight years, fire would sweep through the ponderosa pine forest fed by natural grasses. Grazing disrupted this natural fire cycle as soon as livestock came on the scene.

Mimicking nature to return nutrients to the soil, clean up forest debris and create diverse habitat needed by wildlife is the intent behind prescribed fire, says a U.S. Forest Service guide.

But some environmentalists opposed to the methods being used by restoration advocates, question the scale, timing and efficacy of prescribed burns.

"There's been enough red lights on the dashboard to indicate that they should have abandoned spring burning a long time ago. The burns frequently escape in these unpredictable spring winds. This isn't the first time this has happened in New Mexico," said Sam Hitt, executive director of Forest Guardians, a Santa Fe-based environmental group.

A fire set by the Forest Service last year destroyed several thousand acres and forced the evacuation of the small town of Seven Springs.

A 1993 prescribed burn raged out of control burning 18,000 acres and killed a firefighter, Hitt said.

Forest Guardians has filed suit in the past to block spring burning in national forests, arguing the practice kills nesting songbirds and other wildlife. The group is opposed to forest restoration projects in Arizona and New Mexico that call for limited logging and prescribed burns over large tracts of land.

Prescribed burns should be set in the fall when winds are milder and the fires should not involve thousands of acres of forest, Hitt said. Smaller fires best imitate the natural cycle, he said.

CLOSE TO HOME

In Flagstaff, a coalition of government land managers, Northern Arizona University researchers, community leaders and conservationists are proposing to restore 100,000 acres of thickly grown ponderosa pine forest surrounding the city.

The Grand Canyon Forests Partnership plans to use prescribed burns to mimic the natural fire cycle that created a wide open forest that grew 20 trees per acre, instead of the current 700 to 2,000 trees per acre found today.

Besides promoting a healthy forest, prescribed burning and limited logging will significantly reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire, the Partnership contends.

The Partnership's plan to thin forests has been challenged in federal court by the Forest Guardians and other groups. They claim the project is a justification to boost commercial logging and that the fire danger posed by unhealthy forests has been exaggerated.

"When cutting trees is not an option, the only restoration tool we have left is prescribed burning," said Flagstaff Ecological Restoration Institute Director W. Wallace Covington.

"And when it comes to burning, we've been left with bad choices. Fall burning is unpopular because the smoke tends to linger, so spring burning is more accepted for air quality. But spring often brings strong, gusty winds and there's always the threat of a prescribed burning getting out of control," Covington added.

MOSTLY SAFE PRACTICE

Critics of controlled burns ignore the hundreds of safely managed fires set annually by the National Park Service, Forest Service and timber companies across the nation, said Steve Gatewood, executive director of Society for Ecological Restoration in Tucson.

"There has been so much prescribed burning going on and it has been so safe and managed so effectively that most fire managers worry about the smoke, not the fire itself, getting away," Gatewood said .

Besides the Southwest, prescribed fires are being used across the nation for ecological restoration and to manage timber resources.

Federal agencies that set controlled burns follow a strict set of guidelines, but it's obvious the system needs to be reviewed in light of Los Alamos, he added.

"Fire is a tool that has been used a lot, and you're going to have these kinds of things. The big question now is what you do about it," Gatewood said.

"They will figure out what they need to do so this doesn't happen again. But it will. As long as you are dealing with fire the opportunity for it to escape is there and will," he said.

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