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## OPINION

### Managing wilderness fires: Getting beyond aggressive attack or "let burn" strategies

BY TIMOTHY INGALSBE, PH.D.

Those folks who take the extreme view that all forest fires, even those ignited in designated wilderness areas, should be immediately attacked and aggressively suppressed should be pleased with the outcome of the Backbone Fire, but those people who take the opposite view that we should let lightning-caused fires burn unfettered in wilderness areas are very upset. Had the Backbone Fire occurred during last year's wildfire siege, both groups might have been equally upset. The Backbone would likely not have been staffed for considerable time as firefighters would have focused their efforts on defending communities, but then the fire would have been fought very aggressively, causing damage to wilderness values. As the Backbone Fire is going out, though, the controversy over wilderness wildfire management is just gearing up.

The problem for those who feel that we should "aggressively attack" all wilderness fires is that the environmental damage directly caused by firefighting and the ecological damage indirectly caused by removing fire from the landscape, degrades the very values Americans cherish in wildlands (e.g. healthy forests, clean water, abundant fish and wildlife, scenic beauty). Attacking all forest fires will not preserve wilderness but will ecologically degrade and eventually destroy these values over time.

The problem for those who feel that we should "let-burn" all wilderness fires is that large-scale, long-duration fires do eventually spread to areas that threaten communities and other social values. Even in the remote wild country of the Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains, those large wilderness areas reside in a matrix of small villages, highways and power lines, campgrounds and other recreational sites and Native American sacred sites that would be destroyed by severe wildfire. Passively letting all forest fires burn may restore wilderness and other natural areas, but will not protect communities, and the tradeoffs between a restored wilderness and a destroyed community are socially unacceptable.

For wilderness wildfires, is there some kind of middle path between the extremes of either aggressive-attack or "let-burn" strategies? The answer is yes. Recent changes in federal fire policy by the Obama administration allow us to take that middle path forward, managing fires for both ecological restoration and community protection goals simultaneously.

First of all, we need a new language for fire management that gets us away from the "war metaphor" and the mentality of "fighting" fire or "batting" blazes.

Essentially, this mentality has us annually making war on America's wildlands—a war we ultimately cannot win and can no longer afford in terms of taxpayer dollars or firefighter lives. We should neither aggressively fight nor passively ignore any fire—instead, we should *actively manage* every fire. Thus, for example, when a fire is first detected, it needs an initial *action*, not initial "attack."

Second, we need to stop blindly reacting to wildfire ignitions as if they were unforeseen, unpredictable emergencies, and begin to proactively plan and prepare for them as anticipated, predicted seasonal events. This means developing fire-management plans that provide guidance for firefighters on how to maximize the social and ecological benefits of fire while minimizing the risks to firefighters, costs to taxpayers, and impacts to the land from fire-management actions. It is utterly preposterous that the Six Rivers National Forest has no fire-management plan, and thus must blindly attack all future blazes no matter how unsafe, expensive or ecologically destructive a given firefight may be.

Third, firefighters must be given the right tools, training and authority to work *with* fire rather than against it. Instead of stopping all fires, they would focus more on starting and steering fires, leading flames into natural areas that need a good burn to reduce fuel loads or restore habitat diversity, and away from communities or other sites that cannot tolerate any fire. We have amazing monitoring, mapping and modeling tools that increase our ability to accurately predict the spread, behavior and effects of fire—it's time we start applying them to strategically herd fire rather than simply hammer it. This means turning fire fighters more into "fire guiders."

With the new federal fire-policy tools available, all that's needed is agency officials and fire commanders to have the "backbone" to avoid the extremes and implement the middle path. Let's hope that the next wilderness fire in the Klamath-Siskiyou mountains we see firefighters neither aggressively attacking nor "letting burn," but instead, actively working *with* fire to achieve *both* ecological restoration and community-protection goals.

Timothy Ingalsbee, Ph.D.

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## Discover the fun side of autumn at Pacifica Annual Harvest Festival, Pumpkin Patch and Corn Maze

The bees are busy pollinating the pumpkins, the corn is growing very tall and the annual Harvest Festival, Pumpkin Patch and Corn Maze is waiting to be enjoyed by one and all. There will be plenty of fall fun again this year for all ages.

If you've attended before, you know how much fun happens. If you haven't attended before you are in for a treat. This is the third year that a huge field of corn has been planted which magically becomes a mind-boggling corn maze. Great orange pumpkins lovingly grown by John and Wes Hill surround the maze and every child in attendance gets to pick one out and take it home.

Come and see wool spinners, crafters, artists and many more fabulous community vendors. Local volunteers will provide wonderful activities for the kids. There will be horseback rides from the Brush Rider's, boomerang throwing, rainbow making with the Williams Volunteer Fire Department, a trip through the salmon cycle with ODFW, story telling, pumpkin painting, hay rides, wagon rides and of course clowns! Adults are guaranteed to have as much fun as the kids!

This year, the weekend of choice is Oct. 24th and 25th. Gates are open from 10:30 am until 4:30

pm both days. The entrance fee is \$20.00 per family (up to 5 people) and this entitles each child to pick a pumpkin and participate in all of the activities.

All of the proceeds from this event will help support Pacifica's Caterpillar program. This program helps elementary school children in Jackson and Josephine counties learn and appreciate the wonderful world of nature. It is through grants, donations, fundraisers and the help of volunteers that the price of the Caterpillar learning experience remains affordable to the elementary schools in Jackson and Josephine counties.

So, on October 24 and 25, you won't just be having a great time with your family, you'll be helping lots of kids get an opportunity to learn more about the world around them and nature's wonderful ways.

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