

*The notorious 2002 Biscuit Fire in the Siskiyou National Forest burned nearly 500,000 acres in Southern Oregon and Northern California. The fire became a subject of debate that continues to this day over the healthiest post-fire management of these forests.*

# Let it burn

PHOTO IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

*Scientist Dominick DellaSala says, when it comes to forest fires, we've got it all wrong*

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

On the tail of back-to-back, historically severe fire seasons, drought-stricken Oregon has lit up once again as fires began raging across the state a month early.

Meanwhile on Capitol Hill, the Resilient Federal Forests Act was introduced. If it moves forward after passing the U.S. House earlier this month, it will allow for accelerated timber harvest in federal forests. Proponents say logging and clearing out underbrush in the nation's forests will help prevent fires.

But logging will make forests more prone to severe fires, not less, says Dominick DellaSala, president and chief scientist at the Geos Institute in Ashland.

Additionally, he says fighting to suppress large fires in remote areas is a waste of taxpayers' money, and the common practice of salvage logging after a blaze dies out only paves the way for more severe and damaging fires in the future.

In essence, when it comes to forest fires, DellaSala says we've got it all wrong.

His new book, which he co-edited with Chad Hanson, director and staff ecologist at the John Muir Project of Earth Island Institute, is a compilation of essays written by biologists, ecologists, firefighters and the

former deputy chief of national forests. They all agree we need to change the way we perceive and combat wildfires.

"The Ecological Importance of Mixed-Severity Fires: Nature's Phoenix" carries a price tag that may limit its readership to academics and industry experts, but every taxpayer should heed its message.

Scientific research during the past decade indicates fires are not disasters, but rather an important part of a forest's natural cycle. But despite mounting evidence that shows the need to approach fire habitat differently, public pressure to extinguish fires has thwarted any significant changes to the fire suppression system.

**Emily Green:** *Can you describe how forest fires are "Nature's Phoenix," as the title of your book suggests? (A phoenix is a mythological bird that lives hundreds of years, is consumed by fire, and then rises, reborn from the ashes of its predecessor.)*

**Dominick DellaSala:** For a long time, folks thought fires were ecological disasters. And when you go in and see forests right after a fire, they look like that, right? But soon after the flames go out, there's a whole web of life that comes in. Forests need those fires to be vibrant, fire-adapted systems. The science in the last decade or so has caught up with that perception, and so in this book,

we have put a lot of the prevailing thoughts on their head, in showing that these mixed severity fires are not ecological disasters, they are very beneficial.

The majority of fires we see in western North America are what we call "mixed severity." If you fly over them in an airplane, it looks like a kaleidoscope of different burn patches, with some areas that burned really hot, areas that didn't burn at all, and some in between.

Even in the intensely burned patches, immediately after the flames have gone out, you've got seeds that are prospering – little conifer seedlings come back, right out of the ashes. If you had a fire in the summer that went into the fall when the rains put it out, that next spring you would see this incredible rebirthing or rejuvenation of the forest, beginning with seedlings, wildflowers, shrubs, and then all of the wildlife that come in with that vegetation.

**E.G.:** *Do some species rely on recently burned landscapes?*

**D.D.:** The best places to pick morel mushrooms are areas that have just been burned. Lots of different wildflowers depend on these burn areas, a lot of different shrubs species only reseed when a hot burn comes through. Lodgepole pine and knobcone pine need intense fire for their cones to burst

open and reseed. But I would say probably the bellwether species of fire-dependent systems is the black-backed woodpecker. Everything about that species was designed by nature to come in after a forest fire. It has a jet-black appearance, so it blends right into the charred remains of the trees that have gone through an intense burn. Shortly after a burn, beetle larvae start to come in and start boring into the bark of those dead trees, and the woodpecker in turn goes after the beetle larvae.

**E.G.:** *Can you explain why society has come to regard fire as destructive, rather than seeing it as part of a forest's natural cycle?*

**D.D.:** It's perfectly understandable that people feel fear when they see fire, because it can definitely affect homes, lives and safety. But there's another side of the story that almost never gets told, and that's the ecological side.

A lot of people think a forest is restored when it's gone from blackened to green, but they are starting to get that there's an ecological basis to fire. But when you talk about the big, severe burns, the perceptions haven't caught up to the science – the land managers certainly haven't caught up to the science, and many members of Congress are

**See BURN, page 5**