

Controlled fires could save forests and fight climate change

By Conor Gearin, NOVA Next

Forestry managers face what seems like an unavoidable tradeoff. Controlled burns in Western forests reduce the risk of wildfire but release carbon dioxide, contributing to climate change. But a team of ecologists recently showed that controlled burns can actually benefit the climate in the long term.

Since the 1960s, attempts to suppress natural low-intensity fires led to forests overgrown with small trees and loaded with dead leaves. These act as fuels that easily accelerate a small fire into a forest-clearing inferno, though burning some fuel when winds are low and humidity is high—making a wildfire unlikely—can help prevent future disasters.

In 2012, calculations suggested that restoring low-intensity fire would release more carbon than not burning. However, new computer simulations of wildfire behavior over several decades showed that prescribed burns and vegetation thinning can both reduce the risk of wildfire and trap more carbon in tree growth than an untreated forest.

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