

Opinion: Defending USFS firefighting

By Vicki Christiansen

People sometimes tell me that the U.S. Forest Service isn't aggressive enough in fighting fires. As a wildland fire professional with more than 30 years of experience, I disagree.

Historically, wildland fire shaped the American landscape. Fires were once common, revitalizing and reinvigorating forests and grasslands. American Indians used fire for purposes ranging from shaping habitats for desired species to reducing fuels to protect communities.

Today, our nation has more than a billion acres of vegetated landscapes, most naturally adapted to periodic wildfire. In a backcountry area such as a wilderness, we might decide to monitor and manage a fire, using it as a land management tool to reduce hazardous fuels and restore fire's natural ecological role to the landscape. Our policy is to use every tool we have to improve landscape conditions, evaluating and managing the risks in conjunction with our state and other partners. Instead of waging a losing war on wildfire, we are learning to live with fire.

Still, if a fire threatens lives, homes, property or natural resources, we put it out as fast as we can at the least possible cost. We make that decision while the fire is still small, and our rate of suppression success is phenomenal: up to 98 percent. These fires number about 7,000 per year nationwide.

Two to 3 percent of the fires we fight escape our control. Some of them become huge conflagrations driven by winds through tinder-dry fuels. Such fires are impossible to stop

until weather or fuel conditions change. They are bona fide natural disasters. So we evacuate areas at risk and use special techniques to steer the fires around homes and other points of value as best we can. And we put the fires out as soon as we can.

The Forest Service once tried to put out all fires, but we wasted taxpayer dollars by attacking backcountry fires where nothing was at risk but the lives of the firefighters themselves, some of whom paid the ultimate price. Today, we will commit firefighters only under conditions where firefighters can actually succeed in protecting important values at risk. The decisions we make are based on the safety of our firefighters: With our can-do culture, we expect our responders to fight fires aggressively, but we neither expect nor allow firefighters to risk their lives attempting the improbable.

Whether a fire is in the remote backcountry or close to homes, safety is our highest priority. No home is worth a human life. Any other policy would be unconscionable, irresponsible and unacceptable to the people we serve.

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