



# BETTER THAT THEY BURN

*Our western national forests are on life support following decades of lousy doctoring.*

*By Jim Petersen*

**Y**et another god-awful wildfire season is winding down in the West. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore was forced to remove prescribed fire from the agency's toolbox on May 22 after the disastrous Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire in New Mexico blew past 300,000 acres. It began as an ill-advised prescribed burn in April.

Here's hoping we've heard the last of all the Forest Service happy talk about "fire for ecosystem benefit." The West's forests are too dry. Call it climate change, call it prolonged drought, I don't care. The moisture content in western forests is now less than it is in kiln-dried lumber. Less than six percent. It's too damned dry to be playing with matches in the woods.

In the near term, there isn't much we can do about the climate but there is a great deal we can do to stuff the Bad Wildfire Genie back into her bottle. Begin with the fact that our national forests hold too many trees for the carrying capacity of the land. They are

dying by the millions because they lack sufficient moisture, sunlight and soil nutrients.

What to do? *Primum non nocere*. That's Latin for "First, do no harm." It's the Hippocratic oath taken by physicians. It means be damned careful with your chosen diagnosis and treatment. You could make your patient even sicker.

Our western national forests are on life support following decades of lousy doctoring. Think of this disease as a virulent cancer. Left untreated, it will kill what's left of the West's federal forest estate. More than half—about 100 million acres—is already dead, killed by wildfire or disease, usually both. What is so damned maddening about this inexcusable mess is that a safe and effective two-step treatment has been around for decades: Thinning first, then controlled burning to further reduce the wildfire risk. States, Indian tribes and private timberland owners use these treatments annually in their forests.

The Forest Service relied on this same

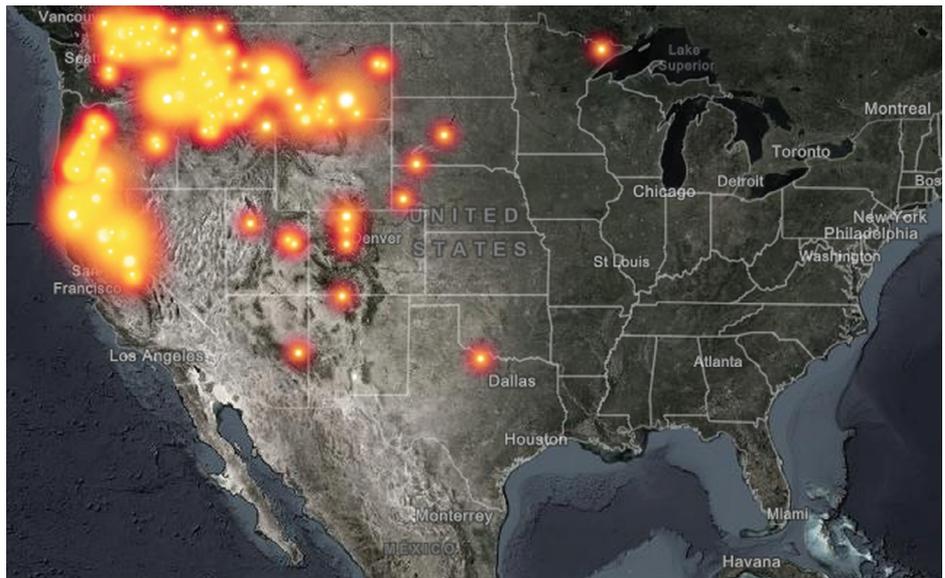
two-step treatment in the Interior West for decades. But faced with withering public criticism from the anti-forestry mob, it gave up on forestry and itself. The tipping point was the federal government's 1990 decision to list the northern spotted owl as a threatened species. The rural West's timber economy cratered in the aftermath. Some 80,000 jobs vanished in the Pacific Northwest. I've never seen an estimate of losses in the 11 western states, but I'd guess another 80,000. Less noticed in the collapse was the near mortal damage done to Forest Service morale. I know this story because six of our past and present Evergreen Foundation board members devoted their professional lives to the Forest Service.

There are 1,168 species on the Endangered Species Act's threatened and endangered lists: 884 plants; 307 insects, mollusks and other invertebrates; 163 fishes; 96 mammals; 95 birds; 36 reptiles; 35 amphibians; and two fungi. Fifty-four species have been delisted, most notably the North American gray wolf. Scientists believe there are about 8.7 million species on Earth, though only about 1.2 million—mostly insects—have been identified. Some 18,000 new species are identified

annually. I don't know how many classify as insects but a Google search tells me most of these new species are creatures that live deep in oceans or in regions where there is little human habitation.

I understand public concern for the loss of species. What I don't understand is our failure to embrace strategies for protecting the habitats favored by threatened or endangered species. How many acres of federally designated spotted owl habitat have been lost in devastating wildfires since the owl was listed? I think about two million acres, but my estimate could be low.

Most Americans can't comprehend any of this. They live in cities or sprawling urban centers generations distant from their rural roots. Farmers and ranchers now comprise



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*TOP RIGHT: This graphic illustrates the enormity of the wildfire crisis the Forest Service was facing in the West in 2021. The Dixie Fire, the second largest in California history, was one of dozens of wildfires that stretched state and federal firefighting resources near the breaking point. The only safe and reliable method for breaking this cycle of fire is a long-term West-wide thinning program aimed at reducing the frequency, size and intensity of these fires. ABOVE: Fire is not our enemy when used properly by trained professionals. RIGHT: Forest Service Chief Randy Moore, far right, is briefed on a wildfire somewhere in California in 2021. California has become ground zero in the West's wildfire pandemic. About 2.6 million acres were lost in 2021 in 8,835 fires. Dixie was by far the largest.*



0.008 percent of the nation's population. Loggers and millworkers, about half that. All factory workers, about 12.8 million. That's less than four percent of our population. None of us should be surprised that so few Americans have any idea where their "stuff" comes from.

And so we return to the scene of the crime: millions of acres of dead and dying trees in publicly owned national forests that could still be green and growing if the Forest Service had cared for them rather than handed most of the job to "nature." Nature doesn't give a damn about our wants and needs. The Forest Service has known for decades that its "we can't take sides" explana-

tion for its public silence in the face of searing criticism from the anti-forestry mob was a loser, but it stuck with it because it did not want to "offend environmentalists" with the truth about their lies.

Meantime, environmentalism's culture warriors busied themselves destroying public confidence in the Forest Service and a western lumber industry that was generationally devoted to its communities and its workers. Now that industry is gone, the communities it supported will never be the same again, the Forest Service is a mere shadow of its former

self, millions of national forest acres have been incinerated and the anti-forestry mob is standing buck naked on a public stage illuminated by the flames of the largest wildfires in known ecological history. No wonder they look like deer caught in headlights.

I don't care what happens to the anti-forestry mob, but I do hope that the Forest Service can recover from its fall from public grace. Its story is the conservation story and the conservation story is the forestry story. I identify the high points in the agency's remarkable tale in "Felt Necessities," a 10-part

PHOTOS COURTESY, JIM PETERSEN



ABOVE: A mechanical harvester cuts a firebreak through Northern California's Lassen National Forest, scene of the 963,309-acre Dixie Fire that wiped out Greenville, population 817, in July 2021. The town is 45 miles from LNF headquarters in Susanville. It would have survived the fire if the Forest Service had an ample thinning program in place. It doesn't. BELOW: The lightning-caused Bootleg Fire, northeast of Klamath Falls, Ore., burned 413,765 acres of forest and rangeland in July and August of 2021. It was the nation's second largest wildfire in a dreadful fire season that saw 408 buildings, 161 homes and 342 vehicles destroyed. This aerial photo teaches important lessons about treating forests to reduce wildfire risks. The green area had been thinned before logging slash was burned, the greenish-brownish area had been thinned but no slash disposal, and the totally brown area has not been treated. Thinning and prescribed [RX] fire is a one-two combination with a long history of success. It beats "managed fire" seven ways from Sunday.



series on Evergreen's website at [www.evergreen.com](http://www.evergreen.com).

If Chief Moore wants to steer a course correction—and I believe he does—he should start by introducing the Forest Service's 30,000 employees to their own history. I'll bet 90 percent of them know next to nothing about the agency's 117-year legacy or the string of post-Civil War events that led to its founding in 1905. This story isn't boring. Far from it. The roles played by a large cast of colorful characters changed the course of American history several times.

The Forest Service is currently about 13,000 hires short on the forestry side: technicians, engineers and "ologists" lost through retirement, attrition, layoffs and a poorly conceived shift in funding from its legendary forestry operation to its much newer firefighting operation.

This transition brought with it disastrous environmental and economic consequences. Who could possibly think that forsaking decades of forest management successes for the unknowns that accompany wildfire was a good idea? It turns out that many who joined the Forest Service in the 1990s thought that using "managed fire with resource benefits" was a good idea. Likewise, many hired in the 1980s held fast to the post-World War II "get out the cut" mantra that turned most Americans against the Forest Service during the war in Vietnam.

The anti-forestry mob hopes the public thinks this is still the Forest Service's modus operandi. It isn't. In Montana, tree mortality currently exceeds growth by 1.4 billion board feet. In 2016, mortality topped harvest by a factor of 26 to one. Same story in every western national forest. Again, too many trees for the carrying capacity of the land. Mortality and wildfire follow.

To be sure, fire is an excellent forest management tool when used properly at the right time in the right place, but now is not the time and there is no right place in the drought-stricken West, which helps explain why Chief Moore took prescribed fire off the table last May. That it took so long attests to the seductive lure of the "let nature" malarkey that environmentalists have been peddling for

decades. Succumbing to this temptation destroyed the Forest Service, which was, by public consensus, one of the two most admired organizations in the nation in 1952 and 1953. The other was the U.S. Marine Corps. Not bad company to keep.

Today Forest Service morale is in free fall, leadership is scattered and faltering, and few know how to navigate the complex and often conflicting regulatory maze that Congress and policy-makers have erected over the last four administrations.

I'll bet not one Forest Service employee in



*AT TOP: Roadside thinning in dead and dying timber near Missoula, Mont. ABOVE: Peter Kolb's 2021 thinning on his tree farm near Evaro. Kolb is forester for Montana State University Extension. The Ph.D. forest ecologist also teaches at the University of Montana in Missoula.*

100 can recite the agency's seven-word motto from memory. It's "Caring for the Land and Serving People." The land isn't being cared for and the only people being served are rabid environmentalists who don't care if every national forest in the West burns to the ground as long as none of those dead or dying trees are sold to "greedy loggers and lumbermen." Better that they burn in killing wildfires. ■

*Jim Petersen is the founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation (1986). He has been working on forest research and education for decades. Tax-deductible contributions are welcome via PayPal at [www.evergreenmagazine.com](http://www.evergreenmagazine.com) or by personal check to 7666 N. 15th Street, Dalton Gardens, Idaho 83815. Thank you!*