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Opinion/Editorial



2011 Fire Season: It's going to take us all

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Every spring people ask us (the Forest Service) if we are ready for fire season. Some might say we can only know the answer after the season is over. But I believe we can be ready for wildfires, in fact, we must be ready, knowing events won't always turn out exactly how we would like. Uncharacteristic wildfires can be devastating to natural resources and our communities. This year's fire season is showing us that first hand. Too many trees and unhealthy forest conditions, a dry winter and spring, above average temperatures, low humidity, and near constant wind events created extremely dry vegetation, vegetation that was ready to burn. If you've lived in the Southwest for any length of time, it's easy to realize all of the conditions favored a potentially long and difficult fire season. And we got it...but we, in the wildland fire business, were ready. Here are the reasons why I think that was the case.

We take our charge to protect life, property, and the natural resources that our communities depend on very seriously. That means taking actions to prevent fires from starting in the first place and being prepared when they do start. We took actions to help prevent fire starts and to protect both human life and the forests that we all treasure. We restricted camp fires and other activities when the risks for fire increased, and when conditions became too extreme on some forests, those forests are now closed to public use. The hot, dry, and windy conditions told us we needed to be prepared earlier than normal for fire season. We brought in firefighters and equipment three to four weeks early and made sure helicopters and air tankers were in close proximity. But restrictions, closures, and securing resources early are not cure alls. We need each of you to take personal responsibility to stop fires from starting. Humans and nature can be unpredictable and the fires that result can be destructive given the right circumstances. It's important to recognize however, what our efforts and firefighters achieve in the face of adversity, and that there are successes to be thankful for along the way.

We are blessed with committed individuals both inside and outside the Forest Service, including highly trained people who risk their lives every day to minimize the impact of wildfires. With nearly 800,000 acres burned this spring on national forests in Arizona (and more each day); thousands of threatened homes and businesses have been saved. We would rather never lose homes to wildfire, but sometimes the conditions make it impossible to save every one, and our hearts go out to those who have suffered losses. The 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire at 469,000 acres destroyed over 450 homes. In comparison, we were able to save approximately 2,680 homes of the over 2,700 threatened by the Wallow Fire and about 300 homes were threatened across six communities and numerous isolated ranches by the Horseshoe Two Fire with nine homes lost. Heroic efforts of local, state, and federal firefighters were aided in these successes by the previous removal of trees to thin forests in and around communities. Many individual homeowners worked hard to "firewise" their homes and we thank each and every one of you. Thinning done around the towns of Alpine, Nutrioso, and Eager, Arizona, as part of the White Mountain Stewardship Project are being credited with protecting those communities from the extreme fire behavior of the Wallow Fire. Likewise, homes in and around Cottonwood Canyon, Portal, and Turkey Creek all benefited from previous thinning and prescribed burns when the Horseshoe Two fire approached. Fire hit these areas with incredible force but the flames dropped down to something more manageable in the thinned areas. Fewer trees in more natural patterns with appropriate spacing result in fires that burn primarily on the ground or with more moderate behavior, and at a slower pace. This allows firefighters to safely attack the fire

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more directly, minimizing its impacts and allowing for protection of property and other resources. Efforts to thin forests around communities after Rodeo-Chediski paid off for the resources, the firefighters, and the communities.

Fire is a natural and important part of southwestern forest ecosystems, so we will never eliminate all impacts from fire. But we can and are striving to minimize those undesirable impacts by restoring our forests to a more healthy condition; a condition that supports lower intensity fires that are easier to manage and benefit the forests. I recognize the urgent need for restoration not only to reduce the risk of fires like the Wallow Fire, but also to improve the resilience of our forests and ensure they are here for future generations. We have accomplished some good things but they aren't nearly enough. We need innovative thinking, committed partners, and a vibrant wood products industry to achieve our goal and overcome financial and other challenges we face. Federal resources alone will never be sufficient. We need you to observe restrictions and closures and do your best to make your homes defensible (www.firewise.org). Projects such as the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI) in northern Arizona and Firescape in the southeastern Arizona are two examples of what we can do when we work together. 4FRI is a collaborative, landscape-scale initiative designed to restore fire-adapted ecosystems on 2.4 million acres in northern Arizona. Together, with a diverse group of stakeholders, the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests are working toward landscape-scale restoration of ponderosa pine forests across the vast Mogollon Rim. The first phase is expected to restore about 350,000 acres of ponderosa pines forests within the Kaibab and Coconino National Forests. Firescape is a program on the Coronado National Forest that steps up the scale of fire treatments to restore ecosystems, assure safe coexistence of communities and wildlands, and maintain resilient landscapes in the face of changing climate. The FireScape projects currently underway integrate science, compliance, and outreach to get to implementation as efficiently as possible.

I ask for your support, your energy, and your ideas to help us meet this challenge. We stand ready with your help... to both fight fires and to restore forest health to make fires a more manageable part of the future.

Corbin Newman was assigned to the position of Regional Forester for the Southwestern Region of the U.S. Forest Service in December 2007. Newman has held numerous positions at all levels of the Forest Service—in both the eastern and western parts of the country—during his 35-year career.