

The West's Ravaged Woodlands

A Problem with a Proven Solution | Posted by Suz-Anne Kinney

The Economist's recent article, "Ravaged Woodlands" paints a bleak picture of forests in the American West and the rate at which they are succumbing to wildfires and pestilence. Attributing this dire series of events primarily to the warming climate, The Economist finds hope in a nascent movement in which industry, environmentalists, politicians and governmental agencies are collaborating to develop more proactive forest management regimes. Still, they have little hope that these efforts will make a substantial difference.

The single largest contributing factor to the state of forests in the American West has not been climate change (according to The Economist, California's drought is 15-20 percent "more severe" because of climate change). The situation described in the article is almost entirely an artifact of the way that our national forests are (and have been) managed. The controversy surrounding harvest activities on publicly owned lands has long prevented the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) from taking a common sense, science-based approach to managing forests to control for catastrophic events like forest fires and disease.

The good news is that a very successful model for managing forests to minimize forest fire and disease risk already exists. We need only look to privately owned working forests to find a solution.

Working forests are managed for production and health. While fires and infestations do occur in these forests, devastating incidents like those ravaging public forests in the West are rare. Why?

At a landscape level, working forests are made up of a patchwork of smaller timber tracts that are thinned and harvested at different intervals. Because they are thinned and harvested at regular intervals, the landscape-level forest has multiple characteristics that prevent catastrophic damage:

- Because they are thinned, these forests do not contain as much fuel as forests that are unmanaged, and the remaining trees stand farther apart. Together, these conditions in private working forests are much less likely to foster crown or canopy fires, which are the most serious, deadly and difficult fires to contain. Public forests, which are less likely to be managed for production, contain surplus fuel on the forest floor. As a result, fires in these forests are much more likely to rage out of control, threatening both lives and property.
- Due to rotating harvest schedules, working forests are also of different age classes. One tract might have been planted 25 years ago, while neighboring tracts might have been planted five or 50 years ago. This phenomenon helps to slow down—and sometimes even stops—the spread of fire or disease. A comparison of the damage caused by the mountain pine beetle in the West and the southern pine beetle in the South demonstrates this. Insect infestations generally start in older, less healthy trees. In the South, where forests are of varying age classes, an infestation might start in a 50-year old stand. When the infestation tries to spread to neighboring stands, it will soon encounter younger, healthier trees that are able to easily defend themselves against disease and insect attacks. This phenomenon limits the damage insects can cause. Public forests that remain unmanaged, however, are more likely to be even in age and, when their health declines, they are much more susceptible to insect infestations that can travel quickly through large swaths of forest. Conversely, uneven-aged forests slow fire progression in much the same way.

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A managed southern pine forest provides ample spacing for healthy trees to flourish and contains no surplus of material on the forest floor that will act as wildfire fuel.

Hamstrung by threats and lawsuits, the USFS has been unable to manage public lands to reduce the risk of such catastrophic fire events for decades. Ironically, the efforts of environmental groups to constrain management activities on our public lands are likely to have an even more devastating effect. As *The Economist* story points out, the “USFS predicts that within a couple of decades, because of slowing growth and climate-related blights, the forests will become an emissions source.”

Today, forests in the West sequester enormous amounts of carbon; as fires and insects kill trees at an ever increasing rate, however, the USFS believes that will change. An effective way of preventing this from occurring would be to manage those lands for sustainability, productivity and health. Not only would this bring industry and jobs back to the region, but it would also reduce the harm done by fires and disease and protect the carbon stored in western forests.

The private working forests of the United States are a model of how the environmental and carbon benefits of healthy forests can co-exist with private enterprise. It is a model that works—one that could be implemented in our national forests with management plans that segment forests for thinning and harvests at different intervals. Doing so would lessen the risk to human life, wildlife and ultimately our national forests. Great American treasures all.

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