

Opinion

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Lions Fire—Coming to terms with fire, smoke and cultural change in California fire policy

Craig Thomas

Most Californian's are getting the picture that something dramatic is happening in the California landscape in terms of fire frequency and extent. The Rim Fire, the King Fire, the Rough Fire and other mega-fire events in the past five-ten years have brought fire to the forefront of land manager planning and decision-making efforts in ways that are setting a new path forward for fire managers and agencies including Forest Service, National Park Service, CAL FIRE, and other large forest land owners and managers such as Southern California Edison.

In California, fire suppression will always be an important part of appropriate fire response in our state with forty million people and significant development in the Wildland-Urban Interface. Communities such as Mammoth Lakes or where I live north of Placerville, on the westside of the Sierra Nevada, are both communities that were built out in an era of fire suppression and fire exclusion, but now the embers and the smoke are coming home to roost. This is a result of aggressive anti-fire policies and a century of trying to suppress and eliminate a critical natural process of relatively frequent fire. As a culture, we thought we were doing right, but we couldn't have been more wrong—socially, economically, and ecologically.

Understanding the social issues pertaining to how we got here requires looking back at the first inhabitants, the Native Californian population, who lived here for roughly twenty-thousand years and who regularly used fire to manage their natural and cultural resources, and they still do today. During the mission period and throughout the Gold Rush, western Europeans did their best to remove the native inhabitants, and their extensive use of fire, and abruptly ended a cultural tradition of living with fire.

Then along came the fire suppression era in the early 1900's. Throughout most of our lives we heard the Smokey Bear story of fire prevention, we saw the regular photos and video of fire ripping through forested landscapes, the burned homes and the continuous warnings about the dangers of fire in our lives. We got that mostly wrong too. The ecological value of a landscape that has intact ecological processes--adequate precipitation and fire, at intervals that maintain the landscapes we live in and near, in a condition that can absorb change, remain resilient and recognizable post-disturbance--is a priceless condition. However, fostering resilient landscapes may not be possible unless we can shift our thinking and accept outcomes such as some smoke in air in the summer.

Economically speaking, we are spending a fortune annually on suppression of fires that are getting more and more powerful and harder to approach, let alone halt in a reasonable timeframe. The fire suppression budget is breaking the bank in the West and specifically in California. Mega-emissions are also sending thousands of tons of smoke (PM10 and PM 2.5) into communities in California and the West causing spikes in hospital visits, lost work days, missed school days, cancelled event and more.

So, what do we need to do? BURN MORE! We all need to support fire managers, trained professionals who can manage fire for multiple resource objectives and do so safely, with lower smoke levels than the mega-emission events from our recent fire history.

What this means is for all of us to understand that there is NO-NO FIRE OPTION in California. Fire has helped design and define our state for tens of thousands of years. It is not going away, nor should it. Fire is a reality in the fire-prone and fire-adapted ecosystems of California.

Living with fire means understanding that fire can be effectively and efficiently used to reduce fire hazards and gain the ecological and other benefits and avoid increasing and transferring fire risk to the future.

The Forest Service, including the Sierra and Inyo National Forests, have done an excellent job of managing the communication and public outreach pertaining to the Lions fire. These efforts include regular public updates of the fire's progression, air advisories that recommend actions for those who are at risk of health impacts, and providing science-based, accessible explanations for how and why this wilderness fire is being managed for multiple resource objectives. Objectives include fire hazard reduction, safety of fire managers, increasing forest resilience, and lowering smoke emissions. All these factors are at risk if we have failed to deal with the fuels on the inevitable future bad day, where control of the fire is limited.

While all fires are managed events, since 2009 the Federal Wildland Fire Policy has broadened the options for federal land managers to light, hold, or suppress fires in a manner that can save public money, build a resilient landscape and do so where fire manager safety is the utmost concern. Think about those 300-plus fire managers laboring in hot, dangerous conditions working with fire to return forest resilience to these treasured landscapes. There is risk assumed when excluding fire from fire adapted ecosystems. There is risk, as well, when using fire to obtain ecological and other management objectives. Close evaluation of daily and seasonal weather and fuel conditions, social and economic considerations, and other factors influencing fire behavior and fire effects are integral in determining appropriate place, time, and circumstances to use fire to accrue beneficial, and avoid adverse, fire effects.

Thank you, residents, in Mammoth Lakes and Bishop and visitors to the Eastern Sierra Nevada for tolerating some smoke in your life. Smoke levels are monitored in partnership with state and local air quality regulatory agencies and the best days for smoke dispersal are used. Just as small fires prevent future big fires, so do small smoke events prevent future, bigger smoke events.

The fire management program considers smoke management in every step of the decision process. The Forest Service knows that visitors and the mountain communities are affected by

their management decisions. The Forest Service attempts to find a balance in the program that addresses your concerns while also returning natural fire to the landscape to reduce the risk of larger, unwanted fires and to achieve the ecological benefits of natural fire. All parties who work on restoring fire appreciate your patience and understanding during this period.

Craig Thomas, Conservation Director

Sierra Forest Legacy and member of the Fire MOU Partnership. For more information go to:

https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/CF_ManagingFire/FireMOU.php or contact:

craig@sierraforestlegacy.org

