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HEADLINE: LESSONS FROM THE WESTERN FIRES Colorado can learn from Los Alamos

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BODY:

You may have seen the recent editorial cartoon - a picture of Smokey Bear, complete with Park Service ranger cap and shovel, with a caption that reads 'Only You Can Prevent Me from Starting Forest Fires.'

True enough, the devastating wildfire near Los Alamos, N.M., began as a prescribed burn set by the Park Service at Bandelier National Monument. But you may not be aware that the Los Alamos fire burned mostly on national forest land, as did the recent Bobcat fire in Colorado. Both were a predictable result of federal land-management miscues and a harbinger of things to come.

Smokey Bear's caution, 'Only you can prevent forest fires,' symbolizes decades of past fire suppression by the federal government. Although many of us have fond memories of the fire-conscious bear, fire suppression - which puts out fires as soon as they are discovered - has resulted in an unnaturally large buildup of dry, highly flammable excess wood in the nation's forests. More than 40 million acres of the national forest system are very unhealthy and face an extremely high fire hazard because of past fire suppression. In short, suppressing fire does not eliminate the risk of fire. It defers it to the future.

Before fire-suppression efforts took their toll, ponderosa pines grew in open stands with densities between 20 and 55 trees per acre. Now, smaller trees grow in densities of 300 to 900 trees per acre. When a forest fire does eventually break out, as many experts have warned, it burns much more intensely, posing a major danger to lives and property and doing much harm to the environment itself. Fires like this have nothing to do with the lighter fires that historically were a normal part of the natural ecological workings of many forests.

In 1998, Barry Hill, associate director of the U.S. General Accounting Office, testified to Congress that an 'increasing number of large, intense,

uncontrollable and catastrophically destructive wildfires' were being seen across the West. As a result of past fire suppression, 'vegetation (had) accumulated, creating high levels of fuels and transforming much of the region into a tinderbox.'

This was not news to forestry experts. In 1994, the National Commission on Wildfire Disasters had already warned of 'an extreme fire hazard from the extensive buildup of dry, highly flammable forest fuels.' In their current incendiary condition, new forest fires posed a constant risk of becoming 'so hot and fast-moving that control by human means is impossible.' The Commission recommended immediate and heroic measures to address the widespread dangers across the West to lives and property.

However, as the nation learned this summer, such expert warnings were not heeded. As a result, tens of thousands of acres have been burned, thousands of people evacuated, and hundreds of homes destroyed in the Colorado, New Mexico, and California wildfires. And we are still early in the fire season.

There are three possible outcomes for the excess wood that past fire suppression has left:

It can be burned in small, prescribed fires.

It can be removed mechanically by cutting down and physically carrying out the trees. Or it can be left to burn in occasional large and unintended conflagrations - more of the potentially catastrophic forest fires like those that broke out in Colorado earlier this month. Prescribed burning has become the federal government's option of choice. Forest managers have been under strong pressure to raise the levels of prescribed burns. Yet, prescribed burning faces major constraints. There is always the risk, as seen at Los Alamos, that the fire will get out of control, and decades of fire suppression has increased the likelihood of that outcome. Federal forest managers are also less likely to prescribe burns after observing the disciplinary action against the Bandelier superintendent. If anything is to be done, the Forest Service will simply have to remove brush and other vegetation by mechanical means. In other words, there will have to be an expanded program of timber sales. The Denver Water Board, for example, is working with Louisiana Pacific Corp., Perry Brandt Logging, Colorado State University, the Colorado State Forest Service, and the National Park Service on a project to mechanically remove excess fuels and restore forest health at the Cheesman Reservoir and south of Deckers. This project is designed to 'fireproof' the forest by removing excess fuels and returning the forest closer to its pre-fire-suppression state. But the option of mechanical

removal appears increasingly at odds with federal policy. Recently, the U.S. Forest Service announced a new moratorium on road building on 43 million acres of national forests, making mechanical removal near impossible (imagine trying to remove excess timber without roads). Since 1989, harvest levels on national forests have fallen from 12 billion board feet per year to less than 3 billion. Yet, if prescribed burning is not able to do the job, and mechanical removal is foreclosed, the de facto policy amounts to waiting for large and unplanned fires, like those that raged in Colorado. Politicians and the press have rushed to heap blame on the weather, irresponsible campers' fires, and poor judgement by government officials. But it was national policy that set the stage for all these fires. If not this time, these forests would have burned another day, as long as their huge inventories of excess fuels remained. The only way to remove these fuels now will be to go in and cut the wood. If federal forest managers continue in denial of common sense, Colorado and the rest of the West can expect to see many more fire disasters.

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