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Forest Fires Rage as Government Fiddles

By ROBERT H. NELSON

COLLEGE PARK, MD.--This year is shaping up to be a time of fire. Thus far, there have been more than 79,000 wild-land fires, affecting roughly 5 million acres, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. We have already experienced the worst forest fires since 1996--and the season's not over yet. As of Oct. 14, five large wildfires were burning in the West, two of them in California. Yet, as bad as the fires have been this year, they are only a warning of much worse to come.

A century of U.S. Forest Service mismanagement has resulted in a buildup of excess wood levels in the nation's forests. This creates a high risk of "large, intense, unmanageable and highly destructive" forest fires, particularly in the West, according to the National Commission on Wildfire Disasters. About 40 million acres of the national forests face the likelihood of catastrophic forest fire over the next several decades, according to the Forest Service's estimate.

It has already begun.

In 1988, the year of the great Yellowstone fires, there were many other less publicized but destructive fires across the West. Then, in 1994 and 1996, both years of low rainfall and high fire hazard, a total of 4.7 million acres and 6.1

million acres burned. And the costs of firefighting are becoming astronomical.

In 1994, the federal government spent more than \$1 billion, and almost that much in 1996, including firefighting by Interior Department agencies as well as the Forest Service. This year is setting a similar pace.

In many years the total costs of firefighting in the national forests exceed the total receipts from all sales of timber, the main source of forest revenue. Firefighting costs are a main reason the management of the national forests is such a huge drain on the U.S. Treasury.

Yet, much of this federal firefighting does little good. Stephen J. Pyne, a leading analyst of forest-fire policy, considers that the \$130 million spent in the Yellowstone fires did not have "any significant effect on the fires," according to one observer.

Once a fire reaches a certain size, "putting it out is a joke," former Forest Service chief Jack Ward Thomas said.

The large and intensely burning forest fires breaking out in the West these days are also environmentally destructive. Fire-ravaged lands are a visual eyesore, to be sure, but their ecological effects are no less severe. As Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt noted in the aftermath of a 1992 Idaho fire, it "wiped out an entire population of native bull trout. It vaporized soil elements critical to forest recovery; then when the rains come, floods and mudslides will pour down hardpan slopes, threatening lives and property a second time."

Catastrophic forest fire is a disaster waiting to happen across the West; it is also a predictable result

of deliberate government policy. Almost since its beginnings in 1905, the Forest Service has emphasized putting out fires as soon as they were discovered. The agency enlisted the public in this effort, reaping enormous favorable publicity with its "Smokey the Bear" campaign. Yet, it turns out that Smokey--and the Forest Service--had it wrong. Putting out fires simply means more wood left in the forest to burn tomorrow, and the fire hazard continues to grow. It was like a lottery where the pot keeps growing, as long as there is no winner. Unless it is removed mechanically, most of the wood will have to burn eventually. As a result of fire suppression, throughout Western forests there are "high fuel loads, resulting from the longtime absence of fire, and the abundance of dead and dying trees, which result in fire intensities that cause enormous damage to soils, watersheds, fisheries and other ecosystem components," according to the Forest Policy Center. Yet, the Clinton administration has been following the Reagan administration's do-nothing approach of the 1980s--perhaps hoping the problem will somehow go away, or at least that the price will be paid on someone else's watch. Leading forestry experts have been warning throughout the decade that catastrophic forest fires across the West are just a summer or two of drought away. Other than a large, uncontrolled wildfire, which no one wants, there are only two ways to get rid of the enormous buildups of excess wood: prescribed burns or mechanical removal. The Clinton administration prefers

prescribed burning, which involves setting many smaller and controlled fires, or letting natural fires burn a while longer. For much of the national forests this strategy is not workable, however. It causes serious air pollution, and there is always the risk that a prescribed burn will get out of control. The lives of too many people and too much property are at risk to make widespread prescribed burning a politically viable option in many areas.

A more workable policy is to go in, cut the excess timber and carry it out. Much of the excess fuels are found in trees that are stunted, diseased or already dead, and would not be worth much. So the Forest Service might have to pay, in some places, for excess-fuel removal. In many cases, however, the wood is worth something, and timber companies might be willing to pay for it. That is where the problem comes in.

If the Forest Service gains any revenue, another term for "excess-fuel removal" is "timber sale"--anathema to many environmental activist groups.

Ever since the spotted owl episode in the Pacific Northwest, the national environmental movement has declared war on timber sales on the national forests. For example, in 1996 the membership of the Sierra Club made it official club policy to lobby for a total ban on timber sales in the national forests.

With Vice President Al Gore as its environmental point man, the Clinton administration is not about to take on the national environmental organizations when a presidential campaign is pending, whatever the folly of

their forest-policy views.
Instead, the administration has talked a lot about prescribed burning, done almost nothing in practice to solve the problem and perhaps hoped another bad fire season would not occur before 2001. This needlessly puts lives and property at risk. The failures of fire policy in the national forests are just one more example of the failures of "scientific management" by the Forest Service over the course of the 20th century. Forest fire is not the only area where the agency has ended up with both economically and environmentally disastrous policies: It has also subsidized many timber sales in potential wilderness and other environmentally sensitive areas. It is time to look not only to removal of excess fuel--of timber harvesting with a forest-fire purpose--but to a new management regime for the national forests. Achieving more-effective forest management is likely to involve a sharp decentralization of management responsibility--putting control with the people who now must bear the consequences of current forest-policy gridlock. The alternative is to see more fires burn. *

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