

CONSERVATION COMPASS

The Forest Health Initiative – “In For a Dime, In For a Dollar?”



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The hottest topic and political push in forestry circles involves creation and sustenance of “forest health” in the “urban/forest interface” and “key watersheds” to ensure forest stand conditions are resistant to wildfires. The management focus is on what is left and not on what is taken – i.e., the production and maintenance of desired forest conditions. If this management thrust comes to fruition at the scale envisioned it would be the biggest human caused alteration in wildlife habitats to take place on the public domain in the last several decades. As such, it is worth thinking about in detail.

The poles of opinion related to federal forest management express generalized interest and support. But, then the fight begins. Some see the program as providing some timber flowing to market to offset the costs of the program. Others assume this is a subterfuge to allow logging. The result is a political impasse. But, the matter is more complex.

The urban/forest interface primarily occurs where private lands on relatively gentle terrain abut federally owned uplands – areas where migratory herds of mule deer and elk commonly winter. Whitetails are year-round residents associated with agriculture and stream bottoms.

Thinning of trees will lessen chances of crown fires and reductions in understory vegetation and cleanup of woody material on the ground (first through mechanical means and then with repeated controlled burns) to reduce hot ground fires.

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Consequently, more sunlight and precipitation will reach the forest floor. Controlled burns will increase volumes and palatability of grasses, forbs, and shrubs, which will attract wild ungulates. Predators may well follow these animals to these enhanced habitats multiplying human/wildlife conflicts requiring repeated, often controversial, management actions. Who will handle these problems and who will pay the bills?

Because of the conditions produced and proximity to seed sources, these areas will be prone to noxious weed invasion. Use of herbicides will be controversial, expensive, and politically difficult. Alternative mechanical control methods are relatively expensive. Burning, in addition to problems with smoke, must occur at a later stage of plant development than is prevalent when controlled burns are considered “safe.”

Repeated burns are routinely made in spring and early summer when temperatures are low and fuel moisture high and reduce chances of “escape.” Burns made at this time produce relatively more smoke. Problems will increase as additional acres are brought into and then maintained in desired condition. When smoke becomes socially/politically intolerable, fall back to more expensive mechanical fuel treatments will be required.

Prescribed burns, no matter how skillfully and carefully conducted, rarely escape control and do damage – both financially and in public confidence. If the program is to be long lived, resources must be available to extinguish escaped burns. Even then, consequences of escaped burns should be anticipated and losers quickly and routinely compensated.

For the program to work efficiently, well-trained, experienced, and superbly physically conditioned crews must do the work. Transportation must be available to ferry crews from location to location as “burn windows” open. Back-up crews and equipment to deal with escapes, including aircraft to deliver fire retardant on demand, will be both necessary and expensive. Monitoring will be essential to build constituency faith and confidence and allow for quickly adaptive management adjustments.

The history of federal forest management raises cautionary flags. Congress

and the administration fund activities they find politically attractive and consistency is not assured. From 1950 through the mid-1980s, timber sales, associated roads, and fire fighting were funded at or above requested levels. Money for road maintenance, road eradication, and stand tending (i.e., thinning) was largely and consistently put off to another day.

Reneging on understood, but non-binding, agreements for thinning of new stands of trees helped produce the “forest health crisis” of today. Those who point fingers at federal agencies as solely responsible for the “forest health crisis,” largely ignore the role of promises not honored by those who controlled the purse strings. Agencies propose while administrations and congresses dispose – and not always wisely. Forest management operates on a vision of centuries while elected officials operate on the basis of election cycles. If past is prologue, several years of above average precipitation and below average temperatures with fewer and smaller wildfires may well lessen the interest in “forest health” by both the public and elected officials.

If people ceased building homes in the interface, there will be fewer problems with “forest health.” Yet, as populations of the western public land states increase even faster than that of the nation, can a worsening problem be avoided? Prevention is far cheaper than a cure. New urban/forest interfaces could be prevented through zoning or insurance and/or tax rates set to be commensurate with increased risks and actions to reduce those risks for those who build in the interface.

Those who support initiatives to address “forest health” issues through manipulations to produce and maintain conditions reducing fire risks should acknowledge, in poker players’ words, that we are “in for a dime, in for a dollar.” Otherwise, forest conditions produced and maintained to resist stand replacement fires and protect buildings will revert, upon cessation of scheduled treatments, to previous fire-prone conditions.

Clear and detailed thought and planning are required. The complexities and full costs of suggested approaches are yet to be fully thought out and revealed. “Looking before leaping” may be old wisdom, but it is still a good idea. ■