

Wildfire Mitigation:

Alternative Viewpoints

“An environmental group filed a lawsuit this week that it hopes will force the U.S. Forest Service to stop routinely fighting wildfire. Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, based in Eugene, filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Missoula, Mont., seeking a court order to force the Forest Service to prepare an environmental impact statement on wildland firefighting that includes an examination of the toll in human life. ‘The thesis of our case is that fighting fires is what has gotten us into the trouble we’re in,’ said Andy Stahl, executive director of the group. ‘It’s time to end the war against fire and learn to live with fire and management it, rather than fight it.’” (p. 10C). (Adapted from Jeff Barnard 2003. *The Pueblo Chieftain*, October 16, p. 10C).

“The Hayman Fire spewed staggering amounts of pollution and left a quarter-billion-dollar footprint during its 20-day rampage, the U.S. Forest Service concluded in a report released Thursday. . . . The final cost was \$237.8 million. The biggest expense was \$42.2 million for fighting the fire, followed by \$38 million in insured property losses, the report said. (p. 4A) . . . Russ Graham, the editor of the report, said the fire was a product of just the right – or the wrong – conditions. In addition to large amounts of fuel, drought and low humidity, the winds were blowing in the right direction . . . The report concluded that fires occurred in the area about every 50 years from 1300 to the 1880s. No other fires occurred in the area until 2002, when two blazes – Hayman and the smaller Schoonover Fire a month before – ravaged the area. The Forest Service began aggressively extinguishing fires after the devastating blazes of 1910 in the northern Rocky Mountains. But the result is that when fires occur, they are more intense, fueled by thick growths of trees and piles of dead limbs and pine needles, Graham said.” (p. 22A). (Adapted from Morson, Berny and M.E. Sprengelmeyer. 2003. “Hayman Cost: \$237.8 Million.” *Rocky Mountain News*, September 26:4A, 22A). (Hayman fire occurred in the suburbs of southwest Denver, Colorado, 2002).

“This summer marked my second season as a wildland firefighter, and my first as a Hotshot, a member of a 20-person crew flown in to fight especially difficult fires anywhere in the United States. So I’m a relatively inexperienced grunt, not a scientist. . . . The good news is that once areas have been thinned, it’s relatively easy for them to be burned safely every few years to prevent future bad fires. What is needed of the President, Congress, the logging companies, the environmentalist groups and the public is farsightedness (something the inheritors of Manifest Destiny have never been famous for). We need to look at the forests and think about them 100 years from now, 200 years from now – and maybe more. What’s needed are healthy forests in as near a natural state as we can get. One that includes fire.” (Adapted from Sheridan, Samuel. 2003. “We Must Fight Fire With Fire – Literally.” *Newsweek*. September 29, p. 12.

“Robert Marshall, who founded the Wilderness Society, was an employee of the Forest Service, and after whom the Bob Marshall Wilderness, near Glacier National Park in Montana, is named, summed up the dilemma over the duality of fire when he wrote about

the northern Rockies in 1927: *‘There were some scenes of desolation that pretty nearly drive an imaginative person crazy. . . . A pessimist would conclude that one summer’s fires destroyed more beauty than all the inhabitants of the earth could create in many years, while an optimist would go singing throughout the blackened, misshaped world rejoicing because the forest will look just as beautiful as before – in two or three centuries. Take your choice.’*” (p. 26). (Adapted from de Golia, Jack. 1999. *Fire: A Force of Nature: The Story Behind the Scenery*. Las Vegas, Nevada: KC Publications).

“Throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th Century, complete fire suppression – at almost any cost – was the socially acceptable firefighting approach used by most foresters and wildland managers in the West. During that era, however, these managers came to realize that fire, not just frequent, low-intensity fire, was essential in the ecosystems to maintain healthy forests and other wildlands.” (p. 5) . . . Although active crown fires are appropriate for Lodgepole pine, they are less appropriate for Ponderosa pine. For that reason, current Ponderosa pine forests that have become too dense are considered to be ecologically unsustainable, while Lodgepole pine forests naturally get dense and self-thin, and they are not considered unsustainable. Thus management activities to thin and remove fuels in Ponderosa pine forests make good sense but such activities would not be considered good ecology in Lodgepole pine forests (p. 7). (Adapted from Arrowood, Janet C. 2003. *Living With Wildfires: Prevention, Preparation, and Recovery*. Denver, Colorado: Bradford Publishing Company).