



Monday, September 15, 2003, 12:00 A.M. Pacific

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## Letting catastrophic fires burn freely is a mistake

By Pat McElroy

*Special to The Times*

Imagine standing in an area the size of Seattle and seeing nothing but a blackened, dead forest, destroyed by catastrophic wildfire. Gray ash covers the ground, choking unshaded streams with mud, destroying miles of critical fish habitat. Unfortunately, we don't have to imagine such a scene.

Catastrophic wildfires have become an annual occurrence, turning huge areas of critical wildlife habitat into wastelands. It is the scene we faced recently, with more than 80,000 acres — roughly the size of Seattle — burned by the Farewell Creek fire, which threatened to spread east into the Loomis State Forest.

Fires that reach the Loomis find a feast of fuel, where thin, dry trees are waiting to erupt into a massive fire. When firefighters look at the Loomis, they see no easy place to stop such a fire, putting the entire 125,000-acre forest at risk.

There is broad agreement about how our forests came to be so unhealthy and fire-prone.

Decades of aggressive fire suppression have left forests with too many trees, fighting for too little moisture and too few nutrients, leaving them weak and dry. Every gardener can appreciate the problem. Maintaining a healthy forest is like maintaining a healthy garden — weeding, trimming and thinning to ensure plants don't squeeze each other out, creating a healthy balance and proper spacing.

Recently, however, some in the environmental community have offered a more drastic solution, suggesting we solve the problem in one dramatic and grand fire, with forest health issues going away in a catastrophic blaze of glory and a massive plume of smoke. They argue that fires are a natural part of the forest ecosystem.

Limited fires, as occurred naturally in the past, can be a productive part of these ecosystems. The fires we face today, fueled by unhealthy forests, are not.

Letting catastrophic fires burn is a mistake that will cost us for decades. Such a solution would destroy vast areas of critical habitat, threaten communities and pour tons of smoke into the air.

One example of the difference in strategy is a fire line in the Loomis, which has been questioned by those who oppose fighting these fires. Trees and brush were removed to create a fire line large enough to contain a raging fire, but light enough on the land to allow quick restoration. Built along an existing road, the line impacted about 50 additional acres and restoration plans are already in place.

No line is foolproof, but it offers a chance to fight a fire that otherwise would find no obstacles between it and nearby communities.

And, while the 50-acre fire line represents a tiny percentage of the forest, fire would have a serious impact on habitat across 125,000 acres. Again, the Loomis provides a case in point.

When private donors were gathering funds to acquire and conserve the area, they stressed its value for threatened species like the Canada lynx. One donor was quoted in June 1999, saying, "In so many other places, we are trying to reintroduce these animals. Well, we've already got them. All we have to do is keep their home intact."

Catastrophic fire would change that. As the "Lynx Habitat Field Reference Notebook" notes, after fires burn, lynx stay away. It takes "a decade or more" before burned areas become suitable for the snowshoe hare the lynx feed on. In fact, the Loomis was identified for protection because lynx have few other places to go. Without these areas, they would find themselves squeezed out of the very areas left for them.

Watching that habitat go up in smoke would be a mistake that would take decades to fix. Not all forests are like the Loomis, but catastrophic fire can have serious consequences even in forests with a history of fire. After the massive Yellowstone fire of 1988, biologists only recently sighted the first lynx returning to that area.

Additionally, a hands-off approach puts communities at risk. The solution offered by some is to use fields and buffers between the forest and neighboring communities to stop the fire. The hundreds of homes destroyed recently in British Columbia demonstrate the risks of this approach. Many homes had such buffers and fields surrounding them. But massive fires build momentum in unhealthy forests, creating energy that can blast past such barriers.

Hoping that these last-chance buffers in people's back yards hold out against such fires puts entire communities at the mercy of a winner-take-all bet that no responsible firefighter would make.

In the end, the Farewell Creek fire was held to about 80,000 acres, rather than the 460,000 acres projected without firefighting. As it was, medical officials report an increase in respiratory problems in local communities.

It is attractive for some to advocate a natural solution, like wildfire, to clean unhealthy forests created by past human practices. Attractive, but irresponsible. Nobody would advocate allowing the natural ebb and flow of the tides to clean toxic sediments at the bottom of Puget Sound.

We need to work with nature to solve these problems, but we must also do the work responsibly and cannot simply walk away from such threats, closing our eyes to problems that stare us in the face.



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