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Healthy forests

Thinning, prescribed fires will be good for the Southwest

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For the last three years, we in the Southwest have been regularly reminded of the precarious position of communities that are in or near forested areas.

The Rodeo-Chediski, Bullock and Aspen fires were devastating to the communities ravaged by these conflagrations. What do we need to do to reduce the risk of similar destructive fires?

This is the question that community leaders, elected officials and land management stewards are and will be wrestling with for the foreseeable future.

While the protection of our communities and forests will not be easily or quickly achieved, there is a growing consensus on what needs to be done - and thankfully, help is on the way.

On Dec. 3, I attended the presidential signing of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003. Nowhere will this new law have a more positive effect than here in the Southwest.

Before articulating why, as a career conservationist, I'm excited about this legislation, let me briefly characterize the challenge I face as regional forester for the national forests of Arizona and New Mexico and national grasslands in the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma.

There are more than 21 million acres of national forest system lands in the Southwestern Region. More than 80 percent of that acreage is at moderate to high risk of uncharacteristic wildfire. I say "uncharacteristic" not because fire is an unnatural feature of our forests - it is not.

Historically, about 85 percent of the landscape burned frequently, but at low intensity. I use the word "uncharacteristic" because the current condition of our forests results in fires that are unnaturally large and hot.

These fires severely damage our watersheds. They alter soils, reducing their ability to capture and hold moisture, accelerating erosion and deteriorating water quality.

These fires destroy important wildlife habitats and remnant old-growth stands, and hurt visual quality.

As we have seen in Arizona and more recently in Southern California, these fires also destroy lives, property and local economies.

Due to effective fire suppression for most of the last century and decades of above-average precipitation, our ponderosa pine forests that were once open and parklike, supporting between 50 and 200 trees per acre, are today a dense tangle of up to 2,000 trees per acre.

Our forests are literally choking themselves to death. The net annual increase in biomass being added to Arizona's forests is equivalent to a solid block of wood covering a football field to a height of more than three-quarters of a mile!

Our current drought is making matters worse. Drought-stressed trees are unable to fend off attacks from insects. Arizona's landscape is now blanketed by hundreds of thousands of acres of red, then brown, piñon and ponderosa pine forests killed by insects, further adding to the fire danger.

Restoring the health of our forests and securing the associated benefits for future generations will take active management. Simply stated, we need to thin our forests by removing mostly small-diameter material and carefully reintroducing fire into our forests.

That's where the Healthy Forest Restoration Act comes into play. This law, which was passed with strong bipartisan support, represents a commitment to decrease the risk of uncharacteristic wildland fires to communities and restore the health of our nation's forests.

It provides a series of new legislative authorities and directives that enhance our ability to effectively manage national forests and grasslands. For example, the act:

- * Authorizes significant new funding for hazardous-fuel reduction through thinning and prescribed fire.
- * Provides for streamlined compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.
- * Promotes community involvement in identification of priority areas for treatment.
- * Directs the secretary of agriculture to establish a new pre-decisional objection process - providing people an opportunity to have their concerns heard earlier in the project planning process.
- * Requires courts to balance the short- and long-term effects of doing the project against the short- and long-term effects of not doing the project.
- * Requires court challenges to be heard in the federal district court where the projects are planned - precluding "shopping" litigation to find a more sympathetic court.

While I fully expect this new law to have near-term benefits to local communities, we need to remember that restoration of our forests will not happen overnight. But we must begin today.

Although the challenges of achieving forest restoration are significant, I believe that with community support and participation, they are surmountable.