

FOREST NEWS

The Newsletter of Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics

Fall 2015

Shots Fired

Trash, destruction and even death. Target shooting brings dire consequences to national forests and local communities while little is done to reign in the mayhem.



Inside

Developing the Grand Canyon / Invading the Wilderness / A Catastrophic Fire Season?



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Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Our mission is to protect National Forests and to reform the U.S. Forest Service by advocating environmental ethics, educating citizens and defending whistleblowers.

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A Shot in the Dark



In July, Glen Martin, 60, was roasting marshmallows with his grandson at a national forest campground when he was shot and killed by a stray bullet from a target shooter. Target shooting is banned in the area where Martin was shot, but the lack of effective and enforceable regulation of this popular activity means Martin's death will most likely not be the last.

Target shooting has been a largely unregulated activity on national forests for decades, and the impacts are oftentimes large. Popular shooting areas are easily identifiable by the mounds of shot-up

garbage littering the ground: beer and aerosol cans, old TVs and computers, even trailers and cars. Trees and signs are often riddled with bullet holes. Target shooters have been identified as the source of wildfires, like one that scorched 5,500 acres on the Mt. Hood National Forest in 2014. And the threat to public safety will only increase as more people recreate on, and live nearby, our national forests. This issue of Forest News examines the impact of target shooting on one local community, and the piecemeal government response to a growing threat.

These threats demand that the Forest Service take a hard look at how to effectively regulate target shooting. It's going to require education and enforcement. It will require working with target shooting enthusiasts to ensure that a few bad apples don't ruin the bunch. And in the end, it's going to require that the Forest Service make the tough decisions necessary to protect our forests and our safety.

Sincerely,

Andy Stahl
Executive Director

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Featured Forest

George Washington & Jefferson National Forests; Virginia, Kentucky & West Virginia

More than a century ago, a federal forester named H.M. Sears described a portion of what is now the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests: “A few scattered bodies of timber, large areas of short, fire stunted brush, black, fire tortured snags, weather-white ghosts of the forest, stood on the bleak, desolate, ridge tops and slopes, as a pitiful, battle-scarred fragment of the glory that was once a virgin forest.”

Today, a hiker strolling along the Appalachian Trail, or a family driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway, would have a difficult time envisioning such destruction. The trees, for the most part, have grown back.

Combined in 1995, the forests span 1.8 million acres, representing one of the largest stretches of public lands on the East Coast. Most of the area is in Virginia, but the forests also include small portions of West Virginia and Kentucky.

The stands of mixed hardwood harbor a wide diversity of flora and fauna. A total of 53 plant and animal species listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act live in these woods. And not all of the region was logged. Wild pockets remain; the forests boast a total of 23 federally designated wilderness areas covering almost 140,000 acres.

But threats persist. Last year, Dominion Resources, Inc. proposed building a natural gas pipeline from West Virginia to North Carolina. A 12.6-mile, 75-foot-wide swath would be cleared across the George Washington National Forest.

To its credit, the Forest Service is not rolling over. This summer, the agency issued a 56-page report listing 335 concerns the agency has with the proposal. David Sligh, conservation director for the group Wild Virginia, said the agency has “given us 335 reasons why this pipeline should not be built.” **FN**



In Depth

Open Season for Target Shooting

Wendy Scholl has plenty of war stories. There was the man who heard a bullet whistle past his ear before it grazed his thumb and blew apart a bag of dog food he was carrying.

There was the couple who spent an afternoon pinned down in their house by spurts of semi-automatic gunfire.

There was the bullet that blasted out the window of the community hall, ricocheted off the floor and lodged in a wall next to a door. Footage from a security camera shows a man and a young boy entering the room less than a minute later.

Welcome to Crystal River Ranch, a tidy community of a few hundred residents surrounded by the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in Washington state. The village sits at the bottom of the White River valley, on the road to Mount Rainier National Park.

In recent years, recreational target shooters have flocked to the area in increasing numbers. Highway 410 offers easy, paved access for the nearly 4 million people who live in the Seattle-Tacoma metropolitan area.

Forest Service roads tracing the mountains and ridges above the community are littered with “trigger trash”—spent bullet casings and an astounding assortment of makeshift targets, from dilapidated cars and washing machines to “reactive targets” designed to explode when struck by a bullet.

On a sunny morning in August, Scholl, who lives in Crystal River Ranch, stands next to an opening in the woods that the Forest Service cleared to create habitat for elk. At her feet lies an array of casings as colorful as bubble-gum balls.

Targets rest against stumps in the opening—bullet-riddled cans and bulls-eyes affixed to scraps of plywood. A sign advising visitors to “shoot responsibly” is laced with bullet holes. The trunks of surrounding trees are splintered with gunfire.

Scholl gestures to the surrounding mountains.

“They pull off anywhere and shoot—it’s just incredible,” she says.

“They shoot off a ridge down into our community. They shoot across streams and rivers, they shoot across trails, they shoot across roads. They often have no idea where they are.”

The White River valley is hardly the only place where irresponsible target shooting poses increasing problems.

Nearly all of the 193 million acres of America’s national forests are open to target shooting. A few regulations exist—federal code prohibits shooting within 150 yards of residences or occupied areas, for example. But enforcement is difficult, given the remoteness of most national forest lands and the limited budgets for law enforcement.

The Forest Service does not track the number of target shooters using national forests. Unlike hunting, no permit or license is needed. No training or safety classes are required.

According to an investigation this August by *USA Today*, Forest Service officers have responded to 8,500 shooting incidents across the country since 2010. The majority of incidents resulted in a verbal warning. Of the 2,272 citations issued over that period, most resulted in fines between \$100 and \$400.

Hikers, anglers and those who work in and near national forests complain that lack of regulations and enforcement has turned many areas into chaotic, anything-goes shooting ranges.

Environmental damage is substantial. Shooters often use trees and other vegetation as targets. Trash is abundant at remote sites. Lead from bullets accumulates on forest floors, posing health hazards to fish and wildlife.

And the results can be deadly. This summer, a 60-year-old man was shot and killed by an errant bullet as he sat next to a campfire roasting marshmallows in the Pike & San Isabel National Forest in Colorado. Earlier in the day, the man’s family had reported to Forest Service rangers that they had heard gunfire. To date, authorities have not determined who fired the fatal shot.

Scholl eases her Nissan pickup onto a spur road not far from Crystal River Ranch. She parks and steps out.

“It finally went over this year,” she says, pointing to a two-foot wide Douglas-fir tree felled by bullet fire. The tree leans across the road, its top propped precariously against another tree, the trunk shredded to splinters.

At sites such as this one, seemingly anything serves as a target. There are aerosol cans, a green Frisbee, broken whiskey and wine bottles, a Samsung cell phone, a Styrofoam cooler, butane gas canisters, a tea kettle, a hollow-framed door, a can of bug spray, a compact disc. A shot-out picture frame leans against a stump.

A basic safety rule calls for shooters to only fire in a direction where an earthen backstop will halt bullets. (The rule is a legal requirement in Washington.) But it’s clear at virtually every place where Scholl stops that this rule is violated routinely. Tree trunks in all directions are pockmarked with bullet holes. Plastic bottles and beer cans hang off branches, nothing behind them but clear mountain air.

Scholl has made it her mission to persuade Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest officials to close the valley to recreational shooting.

She patrols the roads around the community on a regular basis, wearing a bright orange safety vest and carrying a clipboard. Tall, with curly gray hair, she approaches shooters with a friendly, non-confrontational manner. She calmly but firmly advises them that

“They pull off anywhere and shoot—it’s just incredible. They shoot off a ridge down into our community. They shoot across streams and rivers, they shoot across trails, they shoot across roads. They often have no idea where they are.”

—Wendy Scholl, Community Activist

they’re shooting in the direction of people’s homes or that there’s a hiking trail nearby.

Scholl gives frequent tours of the area, emphasizing the severity of the problem to Forest Service and other officials. She makes weekly rounds to popular shooting sites, cleaning up trigger trash in hopes it will dissuade others from shooting there. There’s usually plenty to remove.

People have urged her to wear a bullet-proof vest when making her rounds, a move she has so far resisted.

Scholl also hands out informational cards to hikers and campers she encounters, asking them to report unsafe shooting practices they may witness to a Forest Service law enforcement officer.

Very few such incidents are reported, Scholl says, let alone investigated. There is no cell phone service at most of the shooting locations. Even if incidents could be promptly investigated, Scholl says, the county prosecutor’s office does not pursue misdemeanor complaints due to budget and staffing shortfalls.

Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie officials say they do the best they can to monitor target shooting. But they have a total of three law enforcement officers to patrol the 1,724,229-acre forest, which stretches 140 miles from Mount Rainier National Park to the Canadian border.

Marti Schramm, head ranger for the district that includes the White River valley, says Forest Service officials are considering implementing a “hard closure” of target shooting in some parts of the valley.



Such a ban has been in place along a stretch of Interstate 90, north of the White River valley, for the past six years due to safety concerns.

The Forest Service has held public meetings to discuss the problem. They have installed signs urging caution in areas where shooting takes place, but the signs are repeatedly shot down.

“Typically the folks who are attending the meetings aren’t the major culprits,” Schramm says. “They need to notify those other folks that if they don’t clean up their act, they may not have a place to shoot on their national forests.”

There is little national oversight of recreational target shooting on federal lands. In 2006, a memorandum of understanding was signed that called for cooperation between the federal departments of agriculture and interior and a consortium of 40 groups representing hunters, anglers and recreational shooters.

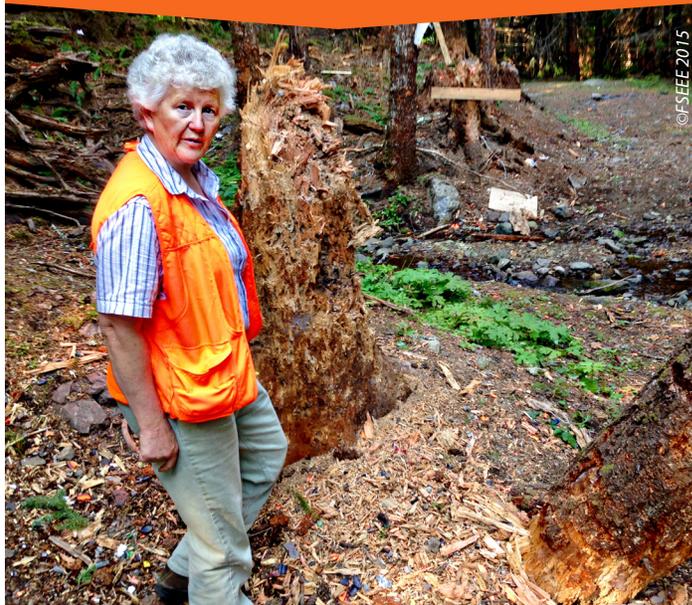
The memorandum states that “activities conducted at target ranges and appropriate dispersed shooting sites ... are legitimate uses of those lands, except where specifically prohibited for safety or other reasons.”

The task of managing areas where target shooting has created safety and environmental problems usually falls on local Forest Service officials. In recent years, a handful of areas across the national forest system have been closed to target shooting, despite opposition from powerful interest groups such as the National Rifle Association.

Target shooting is allowed only in designated areas in California’s San Bernardino National Forest, for example. San Bernardino officials prohibit all target shooting during periods of high wildfire risk; studies have shown that bullets ricocheting off rocks can spark fires.

Other national forests that have closed some areas to recreational shooting include the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests in Virginia, the Mt. Hood National Forest in Oregon, the Pike National Forest in Colorado and the Coronado National Forest in Arizona.

Wendy Scholl stands next to a tree felled by gunfire. Scholl took FSEEE on a tour of shooting sites on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest where they observed shot-up aerosol and beer cans, heaps of trash and even a bullet-riddled camper trailer.



On the East Coast, Forest Service officials temporarily closed all target shooting on North Carolina’s Croatan National Forest this summer after fielding hundreds of complaints. District Ranger Jim Gumm says hikers and campers, as well as Forest Service employees, have reported hearing bullets zipping by.

“Trees have been damaged and have actually fallen from rifle fire,” he says. “And we’ve had a number of near misses.”

That temporary closure ends November 10. Gumm says he expects another temporary closure will be necessary after that to provide time to develop a permanent solution.

Forest Service officials hope to work with local residents and state officials to establish a designated shooting range, Gumm says, perhaps on nearby private land.

Other agencies are also struggling to manage increasing numbers of recreational shooters. In Utah, Bureau of Land Management officials are considering banning target shooting on 12.5 square miles south of Salt Lake City after bullets hit several houses.

Back in the White River valley, Scholl stands at a bend on Forest Service Road 7013. Below, the mountainside slopes down to the river. Scholl points to where her village is located, less than a mile away. She believes the bullet that struck the community hall was shot from this point.

Several years ago, Forest Service employees built berms at the site in an attempt to discourage target shooting. But the shooters keep coming.

Scholl leans down and picks up a few shell casings that glint in the late-morning sun. The hollow report of gunfire from another site wafts through the woods, as it has most of this Tuesday morning.

She rattles the casings in her hand.

“These are .223’s—the same kind that hit our community hall,” she says. “This is serious. This has got to stop.” **FN**

“Trees have been damaged and have actually fallen from rifle fire. And we’ve had a number of near misses.”

—District Ranger Jim Gumm, Croatan National Forest

Officials with the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests in Colorado are considering banning target shooting in some places, including within half of a mile of homes. Under the proposal, recreational shooting would be allowed on about 1.1 million acres of the forests and banned on about 287,000 acres.

Nehalem Clark, who is coordinating the effort, says action is needed given the growing population along the Rocky Mountain Front and the increasing popularity of target shooting.

She says Forest Service officials hope to establish a designated shooting area in each of the seven counties that are included in the national forests. The areas wouldn’t necessarily be staffed, she says.

“We need something that is logical and enforceable and makes sense,” Clark says.

Bison Return to Illinois

Bison will soon roam a slice of Illinois countryside just an hour's drive outside of Chicago. Managers at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie intend to release 15 to 30 of the animals this fall.

The Forest Service, which manages the Midewin, hopes the bison will help restore populations of native plants in the area. That, in turn, should benefit birds that depend on healthy grasslands.

"It's been shown in other areas where, if you are restoring prairie and you reintroduce bison in the area, they can help you increase the diversity," Bill Glass, a Forest Service ecologist, told the Associated Press.

The bison will occupy 1,200 acres surrounded by a six-foot fence with barbed wire. No public entry will be allowed. A plan approved by the Forest Service earlier this year sanctions the experiment for the next 20 years.

The Forest Service hopes to establish designated viewing areas for the public, including overlooks. Agency officials have not yet finalized where the bison will come from. The Midewin is home to nearly 150 species of birds. It is also home to 18 endangered or threatened species.



Court Ruling Protects Tongass

In a narrow ruling that could end years of litigation, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed that a rule forbidding road-building in wild areas applies to Alaska's Tongass National Forest.

The 6-5 decision means that the 2001 "roadless rule," which protects almost 60 million acres of land managed by the Forest Service, includes the Tongass, the largest national forest in the United States.

The George W. Bush administration exempted the Tongass from the roadless rule in 2003. Conservationists mounted a court challenge, and in 2011 a federal judge in Alaska ruled in their favor.

Alaska officials appealed that ruling. Last year, a three-judge panel from the Ninth Circuit ruled in the state's favor in a 2-1 vote. That court later decided that a full 11-judge panel should hear the case.

No logging has taken place in roadless areas of the Tongass for many years. But conservationists praised the latest ruling, saying it gives permanent protection to those areas. Alaska state officials said they have not yet decided whether they will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case.



Spotted Owls in Rapid Decline

Northern spotted owl populations are declining faster than ever, according to the latest findings by wildlife biologists, making clear that the landmark Northwest Forest Plan has failed to achieve one of its primary goals.

Five years ago, scientists determined the owls had declined at an annual rate of 2.8 percent since the plan was adopted in 1994. The latest data show the annual rate of decline has increased to 3.8 percent.

The drop is sharpest in Washington, where owl populations have declined by as much as 77 percent since 1994. But owl numbers are dropping everywhere.

"Maybe the most disheartening (finding) is the strong decline in Oregon and California," said Katie Dugger, a wildlife ecologist with Oregon State University.

Scientists blame the decline on climate change, the continued loss of old-growth forests and the incursion of barred owls into spotted owl habitat. They estimate fewer than 4,000 northern spotted owls remain in the region.

The Forest Service has begun work to revise management plans for 19 national forests covered by the Northwest Forest Plan.



Photo Credit, top to bottom: ©U.S. Dept. of Energy; ©Alan Wu 2010, Aerial view of Tongass National Forest via flickr.com; ©U.S. Dept. of State



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Outcry Over Grand Canyon Development

Kaibab National Forest officials received more than 200,000 comments opposing a controversial proposal to grant road easements that could lead to a major development next to Grand Canyon National Park.

Conservation groups, galvanized against the plan, say the northern Arizona development could sap groundwater that feeds the canyon's streams, springs and seeps.

"Building a massive sprawling development at the gateway to Grand Canyon threatens the very things that the park was established to protect—the waters, wildlife,

dark skies and opportunities to experience natural quiet," said Sandy Bahr, director of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon chapter. "That is why thousands of people here in Arizona and across the country are asking the Forest Service to reject this proposal."

An Italian firm wants to build a major development less than a mile from Grand Canyon National Park, on property surrounded by the Kaibab National Forest.

The Stilo Development Group has purchased more than 350 acres in two parcels near the Grand Canyon's south rim. Company officials hope to build upscale housing, retail stores and restaurants.

The parcels are within the boundaries of the town of Tusayan. The town, incorporated in 2010, has only a few hundred residents and offers a modest array of amenities to tourists heading to and from Grand Canyon National Park.

Local officials say the development is needed to give the town room to grow. They have asked the Forest Service to grant 80 foot easements to the two parcels, enabling road and utility access along with bike and pedestrian paths.

Kaibab National Forest officials must now consider the comments they have received. They said they will decide soon whether to require a full-blown environmental impact statement for the project, or a less-detailed environmental assessment.

An environmental assessment would take about a year to complete, according to Forest Service officials, while an environmental impact statement would take longer.

In a letter to Kaibab National Forest officials, Steve Martin, who was the park's superintendent from 2007 until 2011, urged the agency to require an environmental impact statement.

"An EIS is the most prudent and reasonable response to this issue, in view of the national and international significance of the Grand Canyon and the broad potential impacts and probable controversy of this project," Martin wrote.

FSEEE also submitted comments on the proposal, urging the Forest Service to evaluate the full impacts of the development when considering the easement request. **FN**

Army Seeks Helicopter Training in Cascades

The U.S. Army wants to fly helicopters over a wide stretch of the North Cascades in Washington state, including above congressionally designated wilderness areas, to train pilots to navigate high-altitude, mountainous terrain.

The plan calls for allowing helicopter pilots from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, near Tacoma, to fly training missions over the Cascades day and night, year-round except for federally designated holidays.

The flyover area would include much of the area north of Interstate 90 and east of the crest of the Cascade mountains.

The proposal also designates eight areas in the region that the Army would use to practice landing maneuvers. One of those areas lies just within the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, west of the town of Leavenworth. Under the 1964 Wilderness Act, most motorized equipment is not allowed in wilderness areas.

Another landing site would be located atop a ridge close to the Pacific Crest Trail, about 20 miles south of the Canadian border.

Gary Dangerfield, external communications chief for Joint Base Lewis-McChord, said officials were not yet prepared to comment on the proposal.

“A lot of folks are involved with this,” he said. “So we’ve got to be careful that we put out accurate information.”

A “Scoping Document” released in August says the Army needs the training areas because there is insufficient space on the base to perform the maneuvers.

Also, they document says, helicopter pilots need to train in areas that simulate high-altitude conditions found in regions of the globe, such as Afghanistan, where the U.S. military may be deployed.

“This training is critical to save the lives of aviators and the soldiers they transport,” the document states.

Three types of helicopters—Black Hawk, Apache and Chinook—would be involved in the training.

Most of the high-altitude training would take place above the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest. Cathy Dowd, public affairs officer for the Okanogan-Wenatchee, said Forest Service officials are not yet actively involved in the project.

“We’re just reviewing that proposal now,” she said.

The Army would need a special-use permit from the Forest Service to conduct landing exercises on national forest land.

As part of the proposal, the Army also wants to conduct low-altitude training over much of southwest Washington.

Officials with the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest regional office met with officials at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in July.

“We talked about some of our concerns,” said Shoni Pilip-Florea, director of communications and community engagement for the region. “They’ve been very open to working with us. We’ve established what I think is a very good relationship.”

Pilip-Florea said Army officials gave a verbal assurance that they will drop plans to land helicopters in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area. But Dangerfield said in September that he could neither confirm nor deny that such an assurance had been made.

Army officials expect to release a draft environmental assessment document for the project this winter and issue a final assessment next spring. FSEEE has submitted formal comments outlining concerns about the proposal.

WILD HORSES CAN STAY—FOR NOW

The Forest Service is backing away from a controversial plan to remove wild horses from Arizona’s Tonto National Forest.

An estimated 65 to 100 horses live along the Salt River, east of Phoenix.

The agency claims the horses pose a public safety threat. Vehicles have collided with horses on a highway that follows a stretch of the Salt River. Forest Service officials say the animals also pose a threat to people who get too close.

Defenders of the horses say the animals pose no more risk to the public than do other wild creatures.

“Animals such as coyote and deer are hit on the road more often,” said Simone Netherlands, president of the Salt River Wild Horse Management Group.

Tonto National Forest officials say the horses are once-domesticated animals gone feral, or descendants of such horses. As such, they are considered “livestock” and should be removed.

Earlier this month, the agency set an August 7 deadline to allow people to claim horses. After that, officials said, the horses would be removed from national forest land.

In its legal notice, the Forest Service said unclaimed horses would be sold at public auction.

“Livestock not sold at public sale may be sold at private sale or condemned and destroyed,” the notice said.

Pro-horse conservationists complained bitterly. Arizona senators John McCain and Jeff Flake weighed in on August 5, asking the Forest Service to postpone the round-up.

The next day, Tonto National Forest Supervisor Neil Bosworth did just that.

“The Forest Service will continue to engage with the local community, state and federal officials to explore potential alternatives for meeting our obligations for both land stewardship and public safety,” Bosworth said in a statement.

Netherlands said supporters of the Salt River horses want to work with the Forest Service to find a way to let them stay where they are.

She said her group would support using birth control to limit the herd’s growth. Her group also is exploring the feasibility of installing a system that would use flashing lights to alert motorists when horses are near the highway.

“What we are looking for is a humane management plan,” Netherlands said. **FN**



Field Notes

1 **Crater Ridge, Redux**

Last year, FSEEE prevented the Forest Service from clearcut logging old-growth Engelmann spruce on Wyoming's Bighorn National Forest. The Forest Service is now seeking ways to resurrect the project. In September, FSEEE filed a formal objection to the proposal, challenging the new environmental analysis and showing how the proposal violates the Bighorn's management plan and harms elk.

2 **Restoration or Devastation?**

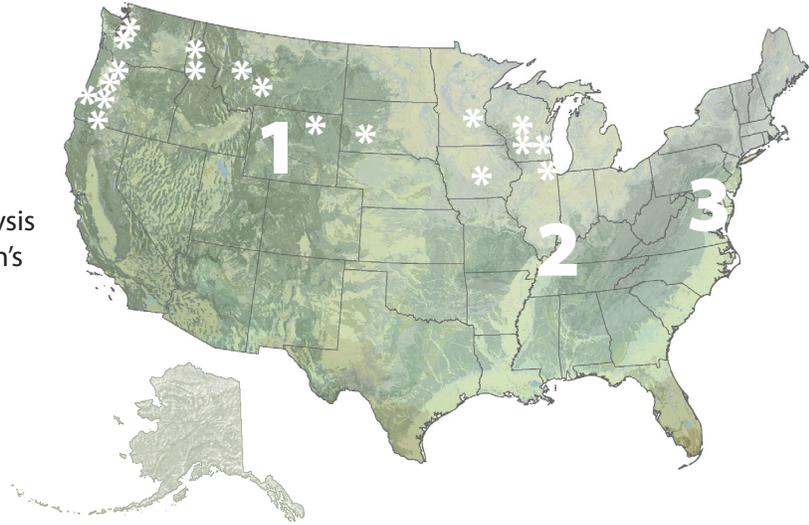
FSEEE helped derail a plan to "restore" an area within the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area. The project would have involved logging, burning and spraying herbicides. FSEEE encouraged the Forest Service to hold off on the proposal until there is a better understanding of the effectiveness of similar work done in demonstration areas. Officials have shelved the logging plans for now.

3 **Bad Bills in D.C.**

The deceptively named National Forest Ecosystem Improvement Act (S. 1691) was introduced in the U.S. Senate this summer with the goal of curtailing our environmental laws, promoting more logging on our federal lands and shutting the courthouse doors to environmental activists. We issued an action alert to our entire membership asking that they contact their U.S. senators and to urge them to oppose S.1691. Thus far, our efforts helped keep this dangerous legislation from progressing.

***** **Film Tour**

FSEEE's documentary film, *Seeing the Forest*, has been touring the nation. Screenings led by Jim Furnish (retired Deputy Chief, U.S. Forest Service) drew crowds in nineteen locations from Ashland, Oregon to Chicago, Illinois. The film seeks to inspire local citizens and Forest Service employees to restore our federal lands and steward our forest legacy.



The end of the year is right around the corner!

Don't delay in making your tax-deductible year-end gift to FSEEE today and ensure that we will have healthy and thriving forests for years to come.

Give at www.fseee.org, by phone at 541.484.2692 or by mail to PO Box 11615, Eugene, OR 97440

2015 Wildfire Season “Unprecedented?”



*Matt Rasmussen,
FSEEE Policy Analyst
and Forest News Editor*

This year’s wildfire season generated seemingly limitless news coverage, taxed the budgets of land-management agencies and claimed a significant human toll in terms of lives lost and homes burned.

Public officials consider it a given that fires are bigger, fiercer and more dangerous now than they were in decades past. They also agree about the need to take steps to address the root causes of the fires, such as thinning overgrown and diseased forests.

Conventional wisdom, however, isn’t always accurate. Let’s carefully

consider a statement made in August by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, whose agency oversees the Forest Service:

“This year, we are experiencing yet another devastating wildfire season, particularly in the drought-ravaged West. Climate change, drought, fuel buildup, insects and disease are increasing the severity of unprecedented wildfire in America’s forests and rangelands, which impacts the safety of people, homes and communities.”

At first glance, the 2015 wildfire season does indeed seem anomalous.

As of late September, just over 8.8 million acres had burned, according to the National Interagency Fire Center, compared to a year-to-date average of just over 6 million acres over the past decade.

But more than 5 million of the scorched acres were located in Alaska, mainly in remote areas overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, which often lets such fires burn with little or no suppression efforts.

Just over 1.7 million acres had burned on lands managed by the Forest Service.

The total number of wildfires tallied was 46,005 as of late September, compared to a ten-year average of 56,327.

In August, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell declared that the 2015 wildfire season is “the new normal.” In fact, though, there is plenty of room to debate what, exactly, constituted the old normal.

A peer-reviewed study published in September asserts that large wildfires were more common prior to the 20th century than they are now. The

study, by University of Wyoming professor William Baker, notes the ecological benefits of allowing large wildfires to burn.

Baker’s isn’t the only analysis that has challenged conventional wisdom. For example, a study published earlier this year in the Proceedings of the National Academy of the Sciences found that mountain pine beetles, which have killed millions of acres of forests across the West, haven’t made wildfires worse.

Not up for debate is the fact that public agencies—particularly the Forest Service—are spending vast sums fighting wildfires.

More than half of the agency’s budget now goes to fighting wildfires. In 1995, the Forest Service spent 16 percent of its budget on firefighting.

When the agency burns through its fire-fighting budget, it is required to use funds earmarked for other projects, a practice known as “fire borrowing.” The fire borrowing tab had reached \$700 million by mid-September, according to the Washington Post.

Members of Congress and Obama administration officials often claim that fire borrowing diverts funds from projects designed to lessen the risk of major wildfires, such as forest thinning efforts.

But a state-by-state report issued by the Forest Service last year detailed which projects went unfunded due to fire borrowing in 2012 and 2013. The report listed 317 projects. By FSEEE’s count, only 13 of those involved work that could conceivably reduce the risk of major wildfires.

Wildfires—including big ones—are a regular, natural visitor to our forests. Given the impacts of climate change and the influx of people choosing to live in fire-prone areas, legitimate questions can be raised about how to manage wildfires on public lands.

But to flatly assert that this year’s fires were “unnatural” or “unprecedented” is to distort the science. Such rhetoric undermines efforts to kindle an intellectually honest debate about the role of fire in our changing forests. **FN**



“Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell declared that the 2015 wildfire season is ‘the new normal.’ In fact, though, there is plenty of room to debate what, exactly, constituted the old normal.”

Exploring A Wilderness in Waiting



The forest covering the steep slopes flanking Wassan Creek is wilderness in all but name. The 32,000 acres tucked away on the Siuslaw National Forest is one of only a handful of places in Oregon's Coast Range mountains that have managed to avoid being clearcut.

Entering the area is not for the faint of heart. The nearest access roads are so overgrown that they are hard to discern. And once they end, no trails traverse the landscape. The going is slow on foot. Spiky devil's club and salmonberry tower ten feet overhead, and fallen trees require frequent scrambling. The steep slopes make it difficult to maintain stable footing. Old-growth Douglas-fir trees tower overhead, their branches dripping with bright green lichen. Rhododendron flowers bloom pink and magenta.

At the heart of this wild land is the Devil's Staircase, a stair-step waterfall some thirty feet tall. The clear water of Wassan Creek spills down step after step. Cylindrical holes dot the stairs, some deep enough to submerge a person, offering a refreshing place to cool off after the arduous hike. Fish dart in all directions along the creek's rocky bottom.

FSEEE endeavors to ensure that this magnificent terrain is permanently protected as wilderness. To that end, we have worked with our congressional leaders to introduce the Oregon Wildlands Act (S. 1699). In June, FSEEE staff hiked to the staircase with Forest Service employees and our conservation partners.

Everyone agreed: The Devil's Staircase is a treasure worth preserving.