

Forestry ^{The} Source

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Commentary: Fire in My Forest: A 50-Year Perspective

By Robert R. Williams, CF

My first real experience with fire in my woods, the pinelands of New Jersey, was at the age of 12. That year, southern New Jersey experienced “Black Saturday” on April 20, 1963, when wildfires burned 183,000 acres of woodland, with loss of life and property across the landscape.

When, in the fall of that year, my father said we would hunt deer on the “burnt ground,” I was confused. I thought the fires of Black Saturday had destroyed all the forests and the deer, as depicted in the film, *Bambi*. But my father, who had hunted these areas since the 1930s, knew about fire and explained that deer are attracted to these areas because of all the fresh growth to browse on. He also said that some of these areas would be great for rabbit hunting. He was right—the burnt ground was full of game.

What’s more, within areas burned by the fire, there were now areas covered with tall grasses, like small prairies. When hunting those areas, my father taught me to watch for movement of the grasses—it would be a deer sneaking through—and again, he was right.

Lesson one: Fire can be good for hunting. Yet, 50 years later, it would be difficult to find a blade of grass in these now dense, overstocked woodlands, and most people don’t believe an open prairie habitat ever existed.

Lesson two: Fire changes forests. Always has, always will.

Fast forward to the summer of 1975, when I found myself working for the Washington State Department of Natural Resources as a crew boss on a three-man “fire module,” a Dodge Power Wagon equipped to fight fire in Skagit Valley in western Washington State. Our job was to train to be ready to fight wildfire and to assist foresters in setting up and implementing large-scale slash burns. At the time, clearcut harvest areas and landings full of slash were burned to prepare the areas for tree planting. The slash burns were sometimes so large their columns of smoke resembled an atomic bomb mushroom cloud. It was not long before one of our slash fires broke out of prescription and ran up the side of a mountain.

Lesson three: Fires are dangerous, serious business. As I watched and participated in the suppression of that fire, I quickly understood how seriously the people in charge viewed fire. There was no mistake about it: Fire was the enemy, and it must be attacked and put out ASAP.

After two summers of that work, I began to understand that fire is a major force on the landscape. I spent the next three years working for both the US Forest Service and National Park Service, and I did hear some talk that maybe some fires need to “be left to burn and take their natural course.” Killing fires remained the theme of my world of fire, however.

My last five years working in the Pacific Northwest was with Scott Paper Company, still in the Skagit Valley. With an industrial forest landowner, fire was still an enemy that could not be allowed to destroy assets such as timber. I continued helping foresters manage slash burns and, at times, took on the duty of searching for “smokes” from logging operations in the dry season. After the cessation of logging operations each day, I would fly by chopper to make sure no residual fires had sprung up. Thus, fire remained on my mind all the time.

Fast forward again to 1985, when I was a forester back in my fire forest, the New Jersey pinelands. Now this forest was called the Pinelands National Reserve, and land use was regulated by a state commission. This regional plan was created to protect the ecological integrity of this region and did recognize fire’s role.

As I began to manage some of the very forest I had seen burn during my boyhood, with the idea of sustaining the ecology of a forest with fire, my view of fire changed dramatically. Can a burnt-out forest be a good thing? I concluded that, yes, it can, but it depends on a lot of things. It became clear that to manage these

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forestlands and be consistent with the regulations, I had to begin to consider the role fire played, but that was counter to most of what I had been trained in and had heard about fire. I was fortunate to be able to attend training sessions on fire at such great organizations as Tall Timbers Research Center and the Jones Ecological Center in the southeast coastal plain pine forests.

I was able to grow with the issue of fire. Fire clearly is on the table now, and in many instances, it is the center of the forest discussion. It’s in the news media on a regular basis. What have we learned in the last hundred years? Are we even close to getting it right when it comes to fire in the forest?

According to US Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, tens of million acres of forest need restoration. Can we prescribe burn and thin our way out of the problem of uncontrolled, catastrophic fire? If we in forestry have been providing management to our forestlands for the last hundred years, why do they now have to be restored, and to what conditions? This is a complex issue that has no simple answers, because it all depends on so many different

things. There is no one-size-fits-all that will provide a solution.

We will not thin or burn our way out of the problem that many forests and foresters are confronted with. If our lands are to be sustained, it will take some sort of ecological management approach.

There is no question that, in the world we live in today, we cannot sustain our forest resources without a viable forest industry that can do the needed forest management. That industry needs an assurance of a reliable flow of wood fiber. Yet both sides of the fire issue remain at odds with one another—one says “let it burn, then don’t touch it—no salvage.” The other says, “Salvage dead and dying trees, replant, and then thin to prevent fires and promote forest health.” The answer is actually all of the above—it’s a matter of when, where, and how.

It is not a matter of trying to control fire—it is a matter of trying to live with fire as a society. How can we live with it and influence it to some degree?

My experience with fire recently reached its peak, when I had the privilege of having Stephen Pyne, our country’s foremost author on fire, visit with me for several days here in my fire forest. What a wonderful experience! I would urge folks to read his

latest essay, “Bog and Burn: the Paradoxes of the New Jersey Pinelands,” at <http://firehistory.asu.edu>. This is a historical and important essay of the Pinelands that looks at how they may provide an example of how society could deal with fire across the nation.

We foresters need to open our minds and look to the future. We must recognize that some of what we did in the past, although well intended, simply did not jibe with the realities of the landscape. We have a unique opportunity to get it right this time. If we don’t, others will take this issue in a whole other direction that will not be good for the forest, let alone the profession of forestry.

So, here I am in my fire forest 50 years later, and the burnt ground is ready to go up in smoke again. This time, there are thousands of homes in the path of the coming fire. As Pyne said in his essay, “Sooner or later southern New Jersey will know the fire equivalent to Hurricane Sandy or worse.” Is there the political and social will to address this? I wonder...

Robert R. Williams, CF, is vice president, forestry operations, for Land Dimensions Engineering, which is based in Glassboro, NJ. Contact him at bob@landdimensions.com.