



Resources & Reality

More fiddling while forests burn.

By Greg Walcher

What if someone said they planned to burn down your house, but it's for your own good? They need to study how houses burn so they can build better computer models to predict future home fires. In the future, therefore, that might help you.

Asinine as that sounds, it is precisely what the U.S. Forest Service (FS) proposes to do, first in southern Utah and northern New Mexico, then in Georgia and South Carolina. It is part of an incredible scheme called the Fire and Smoke Model Evaluation Experiment (FASMEE). The agency says it needs to study the behavior of giant, fast-moving forest fires, so it began setting several such fires, starting last October.

The FS plan to “study” massive fires might have a shred of credibility if the agency had no opportunity to study these disastrous wildfires before. But it has seen over 100 million acres of forests burn over the past 20 years, while doing virtually nothing to reduce the fuel loads or thin the forests to a more natural condition. There are volumes of studies about these catastrophic fires and the massive loss of resources, wildlife, property, and lives they have caused. The Forest Service and several other agencies host websites on the subject and have published numerous studies.

Dare we wonder if there is such a thing as “settled science,” a time to stop studying and start acting?

Officials now claim they need to study the effects of these fires on climate change, but in

doing so they will release massive amounts of carbon into the air, instead of producing healthy trees that absorb it. The goal of this bizarre plot—or in federal terms, the “expected outcomes”—include “improved scientific knowledge of the physically coupled fuels-fire-smoke-chemistry system.” As if forest sci-

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entists do not understand the chemistry of smoke! Another goal is to create “exportable methodologies for measuring fuels for fire spread, fuel consumption, and fire emissions models.” That is, bureaucrats and academics (yes, a university is also involved) are collaborating on better computer models.

It is difficult to escape the observation that forests need better management, not computer models. Voltaire once wrote that “men argue; nature acts.” It is an apt description of how our generation has squandered the greatest legacy of the conservation movement—national forests. Devastating forest fires are constantly in the news, but a crucial fact rarely mentioned is that these fires are *not* natural. They are caused by mismanagement and by no management. Indeed, our generation has all but stopped the professional man-

agement of public forests and we are witnessing the disease, death, rot, collapse, and burning of billions of trees covering millions of acres of previously healthy forests.

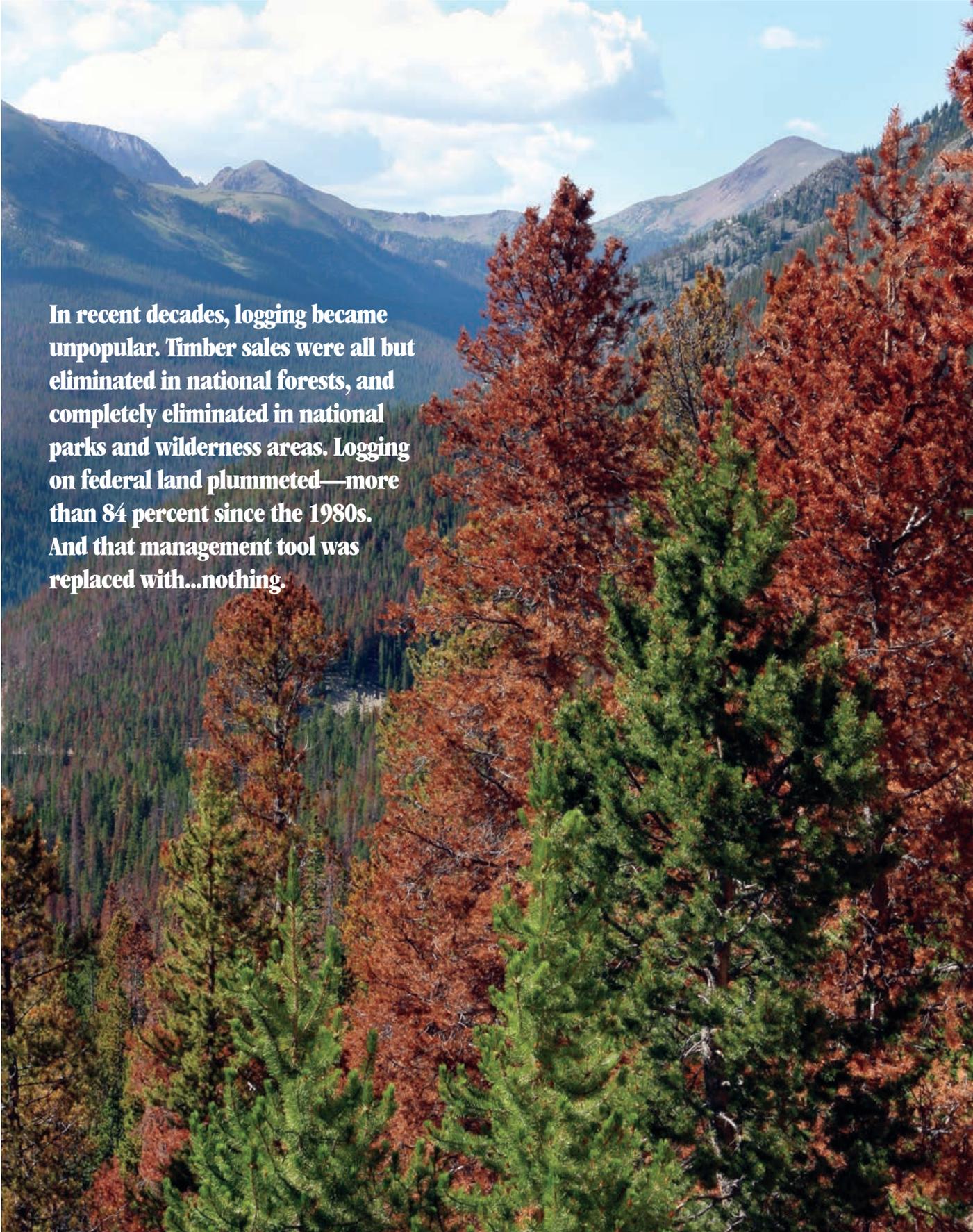
Centuries of nature's uncomfortable balance is easily upset when people and cities move in. So our job is to mimic the role of nature, to maintain the most “natural” conditions possible. We have failed miserably.

Nature had previously kept the growth of forests in check with periodic fires sparked by lightning. Natural fires burn the brush, grasses, saplings, and small trees so the forest does not grow too dense and mostly leave older and larger trees undamaged. After Americans began to settle the West, dependent on forests for wood, they viewed forest fires as crises. Preventing and extinguishing fires became a primary goal of forest management for a century. Yet, national forests still were not overly dense because the natural role of fire was replaced with continual forest thinning. Forests were logged to provide lumber, recreation, healthy watersheds, species protection, and fire prevention. Then in recent decades, logging became unpopular. Timber sales were all but eliminated in national forests, and completely eliminated in national parks and wilderness areas. Logging on federal land plummeted—more than 84 percent since the 1980s. And that management tool was replaced with...nothing.

The resulting unnatural overgrowth is a tinderbox that, when ignited, obliterates the entire landscape in ways that are well documented and understood. Yet political leaders continue to argue, while nature runs the only other possible course.

The Utah fire “experiment” is not only a waste of tax money; it is also an unconscionable waste of valuable forest resources, pollution of the air, incineration of wildlife, and destruction of habitat. I recently spoke at a State Policy Network conference on a panel called “Fiddling While Forests Burn.” The clear conclusion was that torching a mountainside in Utah may add a few more statistics, but it will not address any of the major problems confronting our national forests that a return to sound management might. ■

Greg Walcher is president of the Natural Resources Group and author of “Smoking Them Out: The Theft of the Environment and How to Take it Back,” now in its second printing. He is a former head of the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, and former president of Club 20. For more information, go to www.GregWalcher.com.



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*Lodgepole pines killed by mountain pine beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*). All over the West, millions of conifers are succumbing to infestations of pine beetles. In this photo, the brown trees are dead or dying as a result of damage by beetle larvae. © Ron Wolf/Tom Stack & Associates*