FIRE SUPPRESSION AND THE FEDERAL WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT POLICY IN THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT

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ABSTRACT

Fire has been a global disturbance agent for thousands of years. As an ecological process that helped shape the floral and faunal communities of western North America, fire also maintained the health and diversity of forests until European settlers arrived. Since that time, humans have intervened by modifying the structure and composition of whole plant communities. Livestock were introduced to western rangelands previously occupied by native ungulates that migrated seasonally rather than overgrazing certain areas. Timber harvesting removed the large-diameter, fire-adapted conifers and allowed dense forests to develop after phenomenal seedling production. Fire protection of these young, heavily stocked forests and commercial timberlands became a misguided policy that bordered on an obsession to prevent wildfires. If Gifford Pinchot had known the trajectory he was setting forth in America's national forests to allow densely stocked stands to develop for commercial purposes, he might have modified the direction the forests were headed. Aldo Leopold was probably closer to a management philosophy that would have accepted the role of fire in these ecosystems.

Where recurring fires were once a beneficial ecological agent of change, fire now has become a destructive force. In many cases heavy and unnatural fuel loads have resulted in catastrophic, stand-replacing fires on a landscape scale. Changes in species composition after high-intensity fires or in the absence of fires can and will eventually promote destructive impacts from wildfires. These high-intensity fires will also prevent the recovery of threatened and endangered species and their associated habitat. Stand-replacing fires delay the recovery of the spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*) in certain areas for hundreds of years.

Fire suppression methods have varying success from one situation to the next. Strategies and tactics employed throughout the past century have also had varying impacts on rare species and their habitats. When faced with extreme fire behavior, wildland firefighters are engaging in safe and effective tactics to suppress these fires in most situations. Firefighting agencies have learned and adopted both safety and management actions from tragic incidents like the one on Storm King Mountain (Colorado) in 1994. In December of the following year, the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review was approved by the Secretaries of the departments of Agriculture and the Interior. Integral to this policy are recommendations to improve the safety of firefighters and the public. The policy also promotes management options for federal land managers to use when responding to wildland fires to improve the health of fire-dependent ecosystems.

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