

# ALTERNATIVE SUPPRESSION EFFECTS ON ECOSYSTEM ATTRIBUTES

Francis R. Mohr

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, 1555 14th Street, Baker City, OR 97814

## ABSTRACT

The policy change from Fire Control to Fire Management within federal land management agencies during the mid-1970's provided the opportunity for a different perspective of fire. The objective of suppressing a wildfire immediately was replaced by the need to make unique decisions with each ignition. The appropriate suppression response and tactics selected should result in minimal suppression costs and resource damage. Firefighter safety considerations should also be part of the plan. A key emphasis of this policy change is the need to recognize fire effects, and the realization that these postburn effects, even from a wildfire, are not necessarily damaging or detrimental in all situations. The question that needs to be asked is: "Why are we spending millions on fire suppression, often jeopardizing the safety of firefighters, and yet the fire is not damaging highly valued resources?" To date, this question has been difficult to answer.

The 1994 Granite Fire, in the wilderness on the Idaho side of the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, is a prime example of where a different suppression response resulted in postburn effects that did not damage the natural ecosystem of the area. Instead of following traditional thinking of suppressing the fire immediately, management of this wildfire involved evaluation of potential fire behavior, firefighter safety, potential for resource damage, off-site resource and management concerns, and estimated suppression costs. The selected suppression response of confinement resulted in managing the fire "with time" versus "against time" within predetermined topographic features and boundaries. The wildfire extinguished itself naturally 32 days after ignition. During the first 3 days of this fire, with a management intention of "immediate control," the Granite Fire extended over a total perimeter of 7200 acres (3000 hectares). A review of fires during the past 30 years revealed that fires of this size, when managed with an immediate control response, have an average cost of 1.9 to 2.5 million dollars. However, the total cost of the Granite Fire, with a final total perimeter of 9100 acres (4,400 hectares), was \$347,000. In addition, the postburn effects lessened both the chance of future wildfire escapes and provided increased opportunity for fire to resume a more natural role in this ecosystem.

*Citation:* Mohr, Francis R. 1998. Alternative suppression effects on ecosystem attributes. Page 284 in Teresa L. Pruden and Leonard A. Brennan (eds.). Fire in ecosystem management: shifting the paradigm from suppression to prescription. Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference Proceedings, No. 20. Tall Timbers Research Station, Tallahassee, FL.