

# THREE FIRES

Stephen J. Pyne

**M**odern wildland fire management effectively began in the aftermath of the Great Fires of 1910. The Big Blowup traumatized the fledgling Forest Service and its Chiefs for decades. One of the aftershocks, the 1911 Weeks Act, established the basis for a national infrastructure, with the Forest Service as the institutional matrix.

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## Policy of Resistance

For the next 50 years, the country pursued a strategy of fire

suppression, so far as possible (fig. 1). The Forest Service connected Federal agencies and States. It was a policy of resistance—that is, it sought to eliminate the fire threat by attacking every fire before it could become big, a kind of forward strategy. Part of the appeal of the policy was its administrative clarity and unblinking rules of engagement that mandated control by 10 a.m. on the morning following a fire's discovery. By 1960, the Forest Service had become a benign hegemon that controlled nearly every aspect of wildland fire and much of the rural fire scene.

This approach proved useful for rapidly building out a national system. It failed, however, as a universal strategy because it proved impossible to abolish fire. The reason was that fires that escaped initial attack became bigger. Moreover,



**Figure 1**—Suppression of a wildland fire in 1967 by Forest Service firefighters on Idaho's Kaniksu National Forest. Photo: W.E. Steuerwald, USDA Forest Service.

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*Steve Pyne is a professor in the School of Life Sciences, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ. He recently published *Between Two Fires: A Fire History of Contemporary America* and *To the Last Smoke*, a suite of regional fire surveys.*

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many landscapes suffered from a lack of fire; the strategy eliminated good fires as well as bad ones. It forced one agency to absorb and resolve all the tensions regarding how the national estate should be managed.

## Strategy of Restoration

In the 1960s, a new strategy of restoration emerged. It sought to reinstate the good fires lost under the previous regime, it wanted a more pluralistic oversight of policy than that provided by the Forest Service, and it nurtured a civil society to counter what was becoming a de facto government monopoly. Critically, it was not enough to have a stand-alone fire protection program: fire had to be integrated with land management. Over the next 15 years, every Federal land agency had its mission redefined or rechartered. As the purpose of those lands changed, so did their requirements for fire.

The reformation in fire management begun in the 1960s has not achieved anything like the dimensions projected or needed.

The first salvos in this fire revolution came in 1962. By 1968, the National Park Service had recanted the 10 A.M. Policy in favor of restoration; in 1978, the Forest Service achieved a complete overhaul of its fire mission and its financing. The new strategy pivoted around a concept of fire by prescription. Good fires would be introduced deliberately on working landscapes, and natural fires would be granted more room to do their ecological work in wild landscapes; both kinds of fire would be conducted under a specified set of guidelines called a prescription.

Meanwhile, interagency organizations supplemented and then replaced the singular role of the Forest Service (fig. 2). Then they expanded

from interagency programs to intergovernmental ones, and now they include nongovernmental organizations and the private sector as well. The collapse of the old order was remarkably swift. It was like watching the Berlin Wall fall overnight—or, less dramatically, like watching the breakup of AT&T's telephone monopoly, which happened at the same time.

## Stalled Fire Revolution

The new strategy has now run its own 50-year course, and its problems and promises have sharpened. Prescribed burning has proved more a regional than a national project. It works as a foundational doctrine in the Southeast and parts of the Great Plains—although no one seems to get as much burning done as they believe they need—but it has not become a routine operation in the West or Alaska. The prescribed natural fire thrived in Alaska under a different set of guidelines but died nationally as a concept after the 1988 Yellowstone fires, although it continues to be reincarnated in other avatars.

The fire revolution overall stalled during the 1980s. The reasons are many, some within the purview of the American fire community, many not. Reforms renewed after the 1994 season, culminating in a common Federal wildland fire policy (1995) and the National Fire Plan (2000). The project has had its successes and showcase programs, but the sad fact remains that the reformation in fire management has not achieved anything like the dimensions



**Figure 2**—Prescribed fire to reduce invasive Johnson grass near Sedona, AZ. The fire was part of an interagency Wildland Fire Skills Training Day on March 27, 2017, sponsored by the Valley Verde All Hazards Training Association, with participation by six local and Federal agencies. Photo: USDA Forest Service, Coconino National Forest.

projected or needed. Most observers consider that the threats are outpacing responses. Moreover, the institutional scene has been overwhelmed by competing purposes and new organizations, including volunteer fire departments; a gamut of nongovernmental organizations, from The Nature Conservancy to the National Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils; and private companies that have grown on such a scale that critics now speak of a fire-industrial complex.

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## Burnouts under a resilience strategy may well be the future of prescribed fire in the West.

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Which leads to a consideration of what the next 50 years might hold. A new strategy seems to be congealing in the West that we might label resilience. It accepts that we aren't going to get ahead of the problem overall, that too many variables are in motion, and that the fire community controls too few of those causes to intervene in fundamental ways. It seeks to make the best of the hand we are being dealt, even if, paradoxically, American society is the dealer.

### Three Strategies

These three historical eras underwrite the three general strategies in play today.

**Resistance.** There remains an Old Guard from the 1960s who would like a return to the former order, and there are more contemporary thinkers who want to transform

wildland fire organizations into an all-hazards emergency service, effectively urban fire departments in the woods—or, at a national level, a kind of Coast Guard for the interior.

This is happening globally, motivated by desires to protect structures and lives. Evidence to date suggests that such a revival or a repurposing can help serve a threatened public, but it has not shown that it can manage fire because it breaks the bond between fire management and land management. While a resistance strategy retains the strengths of fire suppression, it also retains its formidable weaknesses as a singular strategy.

**Restoration.** Restoration remains an inspirational goal for many practitioners, either to return to a Golden Age in the past or to advance toward one in the future. Its motivation is a near-universal unhappiness with the existing scene. But restoration, too, has upgraded its mission to include complex collaborations, ways to supplement prescribed fire with other treatments, and a determination to get ahead of the problem—to gather and apply the best science in order to restructure the national estate in such a way that we can control bad fires and reintroduce good fires more easily, cheaply, and safely.

There are many projects actively underway. Yet if the restoration vision still shines brightly, so, too, its problems continue to darken. It has proved costly, not only in money but in political and social capital. Research, reviews, protocols under the National Environmental Policy Act, endless conversations among stakeholders—these are a necessary exercise in democracy but can take years.

Moreover, the actual area involved is small relative to the size of the challenge. The threats are growing bigger and faster than our responses. We need flexibility to operate on landscape scales, not only geographically but also institutionally. We need to move beyond single projects and events. There is little reason to believe that the country will muster the will to rehabilitate at the rate required the 39–58 million acres believed to be out of whack.

**Resilience.** In the West, a strategy is emerging that accepts, in fact if not in doctrine, that we cannot get ahead of the problems coming at us. Instead, it allows for the management of wildland fires to shift from attempts at direct control to more indirect reliance on confining and containing outbreaks (fig. 3). Of course, there are fires that simply bolt away from the moment of ignition or that need immediate suppression. But many fires offer opportunities to back off and burn out. It is hoped that this strategy will prove more cost-effective and safer for fire crews while introducing some degree of semicontrolled ecological burning.

These are not let-burns. Rather, fire officers concentrate their efforts at point protection where assets are most valuable, such as communities, municipal watersheds, or sequoia groves. Elsewhere, they will try to pick places—draw boxes—from which they can hold with minimum costs, risks, and damages. A given fire might see aggressive firefighting on one flank or on one day and a more removed burning out on another flank or at another time.

These are hybrid fires—half suppression, half prescribed burn. The strategy is compatible with Federal policy and in many respects





**Figure 3**—Firefighters on the 2014 Happy Camp Complex Fire, Klamath National Forest, northern California. The lightning-ignited fire complex, managed with a resilience strategy (partly suppressed wildfire, partly prescribed burn/monitored-and-managed wildfire), ultimately scorched more than 135,000 acres (54,000 ha). Photo: Kari Greer, USDA Forest Service (September 17, 2014).

All three strategies remain in play, and all three are needed.

moves in directions long urged by critics and even by the Government Accountability Office, although it can look like a mashup and the outcomes will be mixed. Some patches will burn more severely than we would like and some will barely burn at all, but the rest will likely

burn within a range of tolerance. Such burnouts may well be the future of prescribed fire in the West. If so, we need to do them better, and we need to understand how to build future landscapes out of the patchy aftermath of the megafires that define the current regime.

Equally, we need a reordering of the institutional scene. In political terms, we are witnessing the American fire community's Euro moment. We either truly integrate, we break up, or we tolerate endless bailouts. The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

could become the start of a kind of fire constitution that redefines for our Federal system the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the many, many players in the American way of fire. It could do for the future what the Weeks Act did after the Big Blowup in 1910.

## A Mix of Strategies

So, three strategies. It's worth pointing out that all fire strategies suffer failures and at roughly the same rate. Some 2–3 percent of wildfires escape initial attack. Probably a comparable number of prescribed fires escape or fail to do the ecological work expected. And we can expect similar rates of breakdowns with managed wildfires.

Without wishing to sound flip or push an analogy too far, we might call the resistance strategy a rock, the restoration strategy a scissors, and the resilience strategy a paper. At any one time and place, one trumps another and is in turn trumped. All three remain in play, and all three are needed. We need rocks around our prize assets and communities when they are threatened by active fires. We need scissors to buffer against bad burns and nudge toward good ones as part of managing healthy land. And we need resilience because the ideal can be the enemy of the good, and a mixed strategy that includes boxing-and-burning may be the best we can hope for. ■