

# LEARNING TO LIVE WITH FIRE

Thomas L. Tidwell



Each year, the wildfire season in the Western United States brings headlines and news reports, mostly factual but sometimes misleading. This year is no different, a case in point being “Let Forest Fires Burn? What the Black-Backed Woodpecker Knows” (Gillis 2017).

Stories like this feed widespread misperceptions in the United States: that most wildfires burn on the national forests and grasslands; that the Forest Service does most of the firefighting, suppressing every fire it can; and that the Forest Service is responsible for most of the effects, including homes lost and wildlife habitat destroyed.

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None of this is true. The issue is national in scope. As Americans, we are all in this together. We need to learn to live with fire.

On average each year, only 1 in 10 wildfires breaks out on the National Forest System (NICC 2017), even though the national forests and grasslands protect almost 20 percent of the Nation’s forest lands. Most wildfires, about 7 in 10, happen on State and private lands.

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The area burned on Federal and Tribal lands is larger—about 59 percent of the total area burned—but that only stands to reason. Many wildfires on Federal lands are remote and hard to reach. Moreover, the Federal and Tribal agencies manage many wildfires in remote areas for resource benefits, including habitat for fire-dependent species such as the black-backed woodpecker. Recognizing the natural role of wildland fire, land managers want certain areas to burn.

Still, the area burned on the national forests and grasslands averages only about 53 percent of the area burned on State and

private lands each year—and in some years far less. It was only about 18 percent in 2010, for example, and only about 14 percent in 2004.

So why does the myth persist that most fires happen on the national forests and grasslands? Perhaps because Smokey Bear is a Forest Service symbol—and perhaps because the media often feature Forest Service firefighters and aircraft during fire season. Such imagery might create the mistaken impression that wildfires typically happen on Federal lands.

In reality, the vast majority of wildfires break out on State and private land, and the first responders are therefore typically local firefighters. Rural volunteer fire departments deserve tremendous recognition—much more than they get. So do the State and Federal partnership programs that supply them with the equipment they need to be as effective as they are in defending homes and communities from wildfire.

In fact, the entire wildland fire community works together to manage wildland fire through the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, completed in 2014. Under the strategy, a major goal is to return the natural role of fire to fire-adapted landscapes in order to restore healthy, resilient forest and grassland ecosystems. Where

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Unfortunately, letting natural fires burn, even under carefully controlled conditions, is often too dangerous. For the past 50 years or more, Americans in search of natural amenities (clean air, scenic beauty, and the like) have been

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expanding homes and communities into the wildland–urban interface (WUI). The WUI now has about 44 million homes (Martinuzzi and others 2015), about one-third of

all housing units in the United States, and many WUI areas are seasonally prone to wildland fire. Not surprisingly, the expansion of the WUI in the last 50 years closely correlates with the expanding number of homes destroyed by wildfire (ICC 2008; NICC 2017).

The wildland fire community has an obligation to protect lives, homes, and communities from the ravages of wildfire. Accordingly, local, State, Tribal, and Federal land managers work together to suppress wildfires before they can threaten the WUI.

However, scientists have found that the best protection from wildfires is for homeowners to take steps to protect their own properties (Calkin and others 2014; Cohen 2000, 2008, 2010; Schoennagel and others 2016), such as using fireproof building materials and removing fire hazards near their homes. Accordingly, another major goal of the National Cohesive Strategy is to help build fire-adapted human communities. The Forest Service is working with partners through programs like Firewise to help homeowners take responsibility for protecting their own homes and communities from wildfire.

The bottom line is this: Americans are all in this together. Most American landscapes are adapted to fire, having evolved over millions of years with wildland fire; sooner or later, they will burn—and they should. Therefore,



*Black-backed woodpecker on a conifer. Black-backed woodpeckers require burned forests with standing dead trees for feeding habitat. Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*

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we need to learn to live with fire. The safer America's homes and communities in the WUI can become from wildfire, the more fire we can return to the land and the healthier our fire-adapted landscapes will become. ■

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Submit your stories and photographs by email or traditional mail to:

USDA Forest Service  
Fire Management Today  
201 14th Street, SW  
Washington, DC 20250  
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