

WildFireArticle, by Barbara McCuen

Should the U.S. End Its Policy of Controlled Burns in Wild Areas?

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In May 2000, the country, and New Mexico in particular, held its breath as raging fires encroached upon the town of Los Alamos, home of the atomic bomb and America's nuclear secrets. The fires were not the result of a cigarette butt tossed carelessly out a car window or of lightning striking a dead tree, but were deliberately set by the National Park Service to prevent worse fires. Under normal conditions, the fires are carefully controlled and burn out underbrush and other tinder to prevent much larger natural fires. But intense winds and dry conditions led to a disaster, burning 47,000 acres and hundreds of homes.

Since then, the agency's policy of controlled, or prescribed burns, has come under fire. The Park Service suspended the practice in the wake of the Los Alamos fire, declaring a moratorium on fires west of the Mississippi where dry conditions and a number of existing fires made it too risky to set new fires. While many believe the burns are helpful, others say it's a dangerous way to control the problem.

On One Hand...

The National Park Service is literally playing with fire. The controlled burn at Bandelier National Monument near Los Alamos, New Mexico was anything but controlled. Hundreds of families lost their homes, thanks to the government's risky practice of needlessly setting fires. If the government wants to reduce the risk of larger wildfires, it should allow logging companies to thin out at-risk forests, creating a win-win situation for everyone involved.

On the Other Hand...

Controlled burns are an essential fire-fighting tool for the National Park Service. Without them, many wildfires caused by lightning or by humans would be far more devastating. Controlled burns remove underbrush, which serves as tinder for larger fires, thus preventing wildfires from getting out of control. The Los Alamos fire was the only one of 300

controlled burns in 2000 to get out of control. Despite the incident, the benefits of burning off underbrush still outweigh the risks.

* The May, 2000 fire forced 25,000 people to flee, scorched 47,000 acres and destroyed 405 homes.

* Most wildfires are caused by lightning strikes. On August 4, the National Weather Service reported 75,000 bolts of lightning in a single 24-hour period.

* Almost 4 million acres are on fire in California, Idaho, Montana, Utah and other states. Approximately 20,000 firefighters are currently working to contain those fires at a cost of about \$8 million a day.

* Six deaths to date have been attributed the wildfires raging in the western United States.

* Over the last 50 years, 1981 was the worst for the number of fires, with 249,370; 1950 was the worst for number of acres burned, with 17.5 million; and wildfires in 1988 demanded the largest number of battalions, 8. Records indicate that the worst years for deaths were 1871, when wildfires in Wisconsin and Michigan caused the deaths of 1,500 people, and 1894, when wildfires in Minnesota killed 418.

* The fire that damaged the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in May was among some 300 controlled burns conducted this year and the only one to get out of control.

* Controlled fires were first used in the Florida Everglades in the 1950s and were subsequently taken up in the California Sierras, when research showed that Sequoias don't regenerate without fire.

National Park Service, Washington Post, Time, Newsweek, New York Times