

BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 336

For immediate release:

Wednesday, August 30, 2000

Banning Roads, Burning Forests

By Jeff Edgens

The fires that swept through Los Alamos National Laboratory during June 2000 illustrate much of what is wrong with federal land management. A series of bad decisions the United States Forest Service made concerning a prescribed burn (a fire set to reduce undergrowth and prevent future wildfires) at Bandelier National Monument resulted in a fire that raged out of control. As high winds combined with an overabundance of dead and dying wood, the fire incinerated everything in its path, including 400 homes.

Active forest management in the region, including the logging of dead trees, would have reduced the chances of an uncontrolled fire. Excessive forest litter creates a virtual tinder box. The hotter fires that result cause great ecological and economic damage.

Recently, President Clinton ordered the Forest Service to halt road construction on approximately 50 million acres of national forests.

However, government reports indicate that federal forests are suffering from current federal policies, and adding 50 million acres of “quasi-wilderness” will only exacerbate the problems.

Background on Forests and Roads. The 192 million-acre National Forest system contains over 383,000 miles of roads — eight times the mileage of the interstate highway system. Most of the forest road network was built to facilitate timber harvesting. However, recreational forest users quickly adopted the roads as did the forest service itself for fire prevention and wildlife management. Recreational users alone make some 850 million visits per year to the national forests to camp, motorbike, ride horse back, hunt and hike.

In the last decade, the government has reduced logging in national forests. Timber harvests have plunged 75 percent from 12 billion to less than 4 billion board feet per year. Road building has declined from 2,000 miles in the 1980s to less than 500 miles per year in the late 1990s.

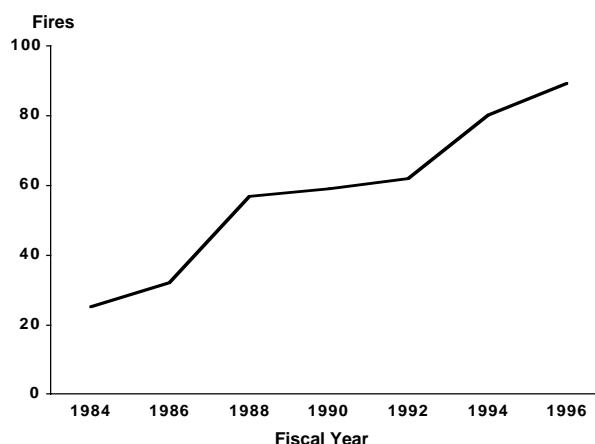
During this time, fire damage to homes and property increased sixfold to \$3.2 billion by 1997. This figure excludes the cost from wildfires and mismanaged controlled burns since 1997. It also excludes the estimated \$1 billion replacement costs of the homes and belongings lost in the Los Alamos fire as well as other associated economic and environmental costs (e.g., temporary housing, clearing damaged homes and timber, reseeding, controlling erosion, etc.).

So far in 2000, more than 55,000 wildfires have blackened more than 4 million acres. Wildfires that destroy 1,000 acres or more have increased from 25 in 1984 to 89 per year in 1996 [see the figure]. This spring alone, excluding Los Alamos, New Mexico has lost 200,000 acres to flames — four times more than in 1999. Only 38 out of 3,700 prescribed fires set since 1968 have gone out of control, but the losses in terms

of human life and property damage have been enormous.

- While Los Alamos burned, so did 8,650 acres near Ruidoso, N.M.
- Michigan saw 50,000 acres decimated by a 1980 prescribed burn to create habitat for the Kirtland’s warbler, destroying homes and killing one person.
- Prescribed burns in 1988 laid waste to 1.2 million acres of Yellowstone National Park.
- 25 Oakland, Calif., residents died and 700 homes were destroyed in 1991 by a raging wildfire.
- Forest managers lost control of a 1999 prescribed burn that destroyed 23 homes in Lewiston, Calif.

National Forest Fires of 1,000 Acres or More



Source: U. S. General Accounting Office and National Interagency Fire Center.

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Forest roads act as fire breaks and provide access to dead and dying timber for mechanical removal. Without such access, more deadly and costly fires are inevitable.

Forest Roads: Economic and Environmental Costs.

Fiscal conservatives criticize the USFS because its road-building program does not pay for itself. Environmentalists criticize the environmental damage that run-off from poorly maintained forest roads causes.

Construction costs for forest roads range from \$7,000 to \$11,000 per mile, according to the National Forest Road System and Use Report. In addition, the maintenance backlog and necessary improvements are estimated to cost \$8.4 billion.

While timber harvests offset some portion of road construction costs, recreationists pay minimal fees or no fees at all to use forest roads. This is important, since recreational activities account for 1.7 million vehicle miles — a tenfold increase in recreational vehicular traffic since 1950. And recreation continues to grow, with 860 million visitors in 1997.

Poor forest road construction also leads to environmental damage. Forest Service surveys have counted 11,000 road culverts in the national forests. Erosion around these culverts forces sediment into streams causing significant environmental damage. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) report, “Federal Role in Addressing — and Contributing to — Nonpoint Source Pollution,” documents how federal activities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon and Utah cause water quality problems. In Arizona, federal activities cause 50 percent of the water quality impairment in the state’s rivers, streams and reservoirs. As more people congregate in the same limited areas, forest managers can expect greater harm to the national forests through overuse.

Roadless Areas Stoke the Wildfires. Dead and dying wood is the greatest environmental hazard threatening our national forests. President Clinton’s roadless area policy exacerbates the threat to forest health by making these areas more vulnerable to fire, disease and insect infestation.

An April 1999 GAO report, “Western National Forests : A Cohesive Strategy Is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats,” finds a large build-up of dead wood and undergrowth in many western forests, creating

what it refers to as a tinder box. The greater the amount of fuel wood, the more difficult fire suppression becomes. The GAO suggests mechanical removal of this wood, which requires access to forest lands — access which will be hampered if Clinton’s roadless policy is implemented. Reduced road access will result in slower fire response and greater ecological and economic damage.

Uncontrolled fires cause cities and towns near them to violate the Clean Air Act, and eroded soils from the scorched lands clog streams and impair aquatic habitats. In addition, as greater numbers of people use the national forests for recreation, the roadless policy will limit the areas to which they have access. More people in fixed areas will cause further management problems, including more solid waste, quicker erosion around campgrounds and trails, infrastructure deterioration through overuse — and more of the crowding and noise people seek to escape. Dispersed recreation is better for forest users and for forest health. This can be accomplished only with *greater* access to public lands.

Conclusion. Forest roads are costly to build and maintain, and when they are not properly constructed and preserved the environment suffers. The roads also provide economic and environmental benefits such as access to timber used for wood and paper products and home construction, public recreation and the opportunity to properly manage forests so as to enhance their health and prevent catastrophic fires. The cost in terms of lives lost, property destroyed, ecosystems disrupted and waterways polluted by uncontrolled wildfires dwarfs the cost of proper maintenance. The environmental damage from decrepit forest roads could be prevented if the roads were repaired and their upkeep fully funded. The costs of roads could be covered by (a) charging users prices for forest access that fully cover the costs of construction and maintenance, by (b) replenishing the roads budget out of the savings to the forest firefighting budget, access or by (c) turning over the management of the forests to private companies with a profit motive. Any of these suggestions would be better for forest health and citizen safety than President Clinton’s roadless plan.

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