

I am James E. (Jim) Paxon. I served in the U.S. Forest Service for 34 years, retiring in 2003. I was a forester and firefighter for my entire career. I had the privilege of being a District Ranger for 22 of those 34 years and also served as the Information Officer on a Type I Incident (Fire) Management Team for more than ten years. My experience comes from being involved in on-the-ground management for five decades

We are experiencing large, destructive wildfires this year in a trend that has been occurring for more than three decades. One can argue that "climate change" is the culprit, but I contend that allowing fuels to grow uninhibited, cessation of timber sales on most federal forested lands and removal of periodic fire from much of our wild lands are more the cause of these large destructive fires that put rural communities and rural homesteads at risk.

It is certain that with the recent Hermit's Peak/ Calf Canyon Fire that burned as the result of two "prescribed fires" and consumed more than 340,000 acres destroying 900 buildings and more than 400 homes, there will be a hue and cry to "outlaw" prescribed fires totally. That is the absolute worst thing that can happen to the environment and will ultimately cause more catastrophic wildfires with increasing damages and costs.

Nature will simply not allow excessive accumulation of "too many trees" which are really stored energy on the stump. Periodically, Nature would remove part of that energy (fuel accumulation) with a fire. Then the land recovers and there are mixture of various sizes of trees, brush and grass for that particular site, until the next fire. We humans have interrupted Nature's cycles of fire. We have moved into her midst and built homes, trails, roads and even towns. And fire scares us...it threatens us. Many do not like timber sales where trees are cut, skidded and loaded onto trucks...it is ugly. Thinning also makes the forest less attractive with all the slash and piled brush and then the pile burning, preferably when there is adequate snow on the ground. Many residents in mountainous, forested areas do not like smoke from prescribed fires. The benefits of temporary smoke are not seen as being better than the choking, acrid smoke of a catastrophic wildfire. Folks, we can't have it both ways. Living in forested areas is not a postcard moment. We need to understand what is happening with our wildlands and fire.

Since the passage of NEPA in 1969 and implementation in 1973 a myriad of environmental laws have passed. Many of these laws have complicated or impeded management of forested lands by the U.S Forest Service, BLM and other federal agencies.

Many of these laws have merit and were passed with good intent, but the history of implementation and outright manipulation by radical environmental groups has done more damage than if they had not passed. An example is the Endangered Species Act and more specifically, protections for the Mexican Spotted Owl. MSO only occurs in Arizona and New Mexico. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinated with the Forest Service to protect (preserve) old growth stands of mixed conifers and Ponderosa Pine that Mexican Spotted Owls nest in. Timber sales were not allowed and even use of chainsaws adjacent to Protected Activity Centers of approximately 600 acres was not allowed during nesting season (March to July).

Let me give you an example. The Center for Biological Diversity appealed or litigated timber sales on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona for several years in the 1990's. The Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned in June 2002 and damaged 468,000 + acres and destroyed 460 homes in the Show Low and Heber-Overgaard area of the White Mountains. Approximately 60 Mexican Spotted Owl PACs (600 acre protected activity centers) burned up and resident owls were either killed or displaced. The Center for Biological Diversity even appealed the salvage logging of dead pines within the fire's perimeter.

2011 saw the Wallow Fire near Alpine, Arizona burned 538,000 acres and approximately 100 MSO-PACs were destroyed. In 2012, the Whitewater-Baldy Fire north of Silver City, New Mexico burned 298,000 acres and more than 70 MSO PACs were destroyed. In 2013, the Silver Fire burned east of Silver City, New Mexico and an undetermined number of MSO-PACs burned. Just this year, the Black Fire near Truth or Consequences, New Mexico has burned 325,000 acres in MSO habitat, but no data available on MSO-PACs and of course the 348,000 acres burned in the Hermit's Peak/ Calf Canyon Fire has MSO habitat as well.

I would estimate that somewhere close to 75% of suitable habitat for MSO has been severely impacted by wildfire, YET, WE STILL HAVE MEXICAN SPOTTED OWLS. They have proven to be more resilient than we thought. However, the habitat for Mexican Spotted Owls is becoming less with each large fire.

We must begin now to better manage our forests to reduce fuels and reduce the incidence of large destructive wildfires. Nothing remains as it is today, especially in a forest. These are changing, evolving plant and animal communities that do not remain static as some would wish. Yet, the forests are loved by many, even to their destruction with a desire to "preserve" them.

In my 50 years of observation, I believe that most things involving forested lands, such as timber sales, thinning and fuels reduction and prescribed fire can occur in balance with other needs and management actions.

I look forward to sharing with the committee.