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4 Jan 2009, 3:21pm

[Saving Forests](#)

by admin

## No, we don't need more fires

Guest Viewpoint by Bob Zybach, Eugene Register Guard, Jan 4, 2009 [[here](#)]

I disagree with the majority of statements and conclusions made by George Wuerthner in his Dec. 26 guest viewpoint on the topic of wildfire ecology.

Wuerthner is a nature photographer, trail guide and science journalist whose opinions on federal resource management policies are widely disseminated through books, blogs, letters and articles. To my knowledge, he has received no advanced degrees in a scientific discipline, conducted no formal scientific research, or ever written a peer-reviewed journal article.

This is important, because Wuerthner presumes to lecture his readers on the intricacies of ecological science, and to present his personal opinions as if they were generally accepted facts. For example, after noting a commonly known phenomenon ("remember, the sun does appear to go around the

Earth”), he states: “Contrary to common opinion, large blazes are not driven primarily by fuels, but by climatic conditions.” These statements are not analogous. One is a fact, the other an opinion.

Contrary to Wuerthner’s assertions, my own research — and the research of hundreds of other scientists — demonstrates that wildfires are not a direct function of climate at all (think of a hot, arid desert, for example), but rather are functions of fuel, topography and seasonal weather (not climate!) conditions. Fire, first and foremost, needs fuel.

That’s a fact, not an opinion.

Wuerthner attempts to discredit an earlier Register-Guard guest viewpoint by Kathy Lynn of the University of Oregon, which reasonably called for fuel management actions to reduce the frequency and severity of wildfire. Wuerthner claimed Lynn’s statements were “full of flawed assumptions and consequently flawed solutions.”

Wuerthner presents no data to support his contentions. More telling are the personal values mixed in with his “science.” Even if wildfires were just as common in the past as today, does that mean they are good today? Malaria and cholera used to be more common in the past. Should their occurrence be returned to previous levels? And why is “increased biodiversity” implied to be such a good thing, and what does it have to do with wildfire? Think of the massive increase in “biodiversity” in Eugene during the past 150 years, for example, with the introduction of thousands of new species of weeds, domestic plants and animals — and all without wildfire! Is that somehow good for the environment?

Additional thoughts from Wuerthner: “If anything, we probably need more wildfire, not less. With global warming we will probably get it, as vegetative communities adapt to new climatic realities,” and: “Another surprising finding is that mechanical fuels treatment, commonly known as logging and thinning, typically has little effect on the spread of wildfires.”

If you believe Wuerthner’s claim that wildfires are “driven primarily by climatic conditions,” and if you accept global warming as a fact and believe such changes will be conducive to more wildfires, and if you think that plants live in “communities,” then perhaps he has a valid point. But suppose all this conjecture turns out to be true: So what? More wildfires? Didn’t he also say “we probably need more” (for whatever reason) anyway? Wuerthner’s arguments, much like his analogy of the sun, appear to go around in circles, with no real logic to them.

Oregonians old enough to remember the “six-year jinx” of Tillamook fires (1933-51), or who have closely observed the burning patterns of the 2003 B&B Complex, understand the fallacy of his statements. We do not “probably need more wildfire” (for lots of good reasons) — and logging and thinning, not “surprisingly,” often do have an observable and beneficial effect on the severity and spread of wildfires.

Our nation’s heritage forests are going up in predictable and preventable flames, creating an ugly, dangerous environment full of dead plants and animals, and contributing to air pollution, stream sedimentation, and ruined rural economies.

Something needs to be done to correct these problems. Kathy Lynn offers helpful suggestions based in science; George Wuerthner offers personal opinions.

*Bob Zybach is a forest scientist with a doctorate from Oregon State University. Zybach has been program manager for the Oregon Websites and Watersheds Project ([www .ORWW.org](http://www.ORWW.org)) since 1996.*

4 Jan 2009, 9:31pm

by [Mike](#)

Contrary to the pronouncements of “ecologist” George Weurthner, the overwhelming consensus of forest scientists agree that fuels cause fires. Further, without forest restoration treatments wildfires will destroy Oregon’s heritage forests.

Drs. Jerry Franklin and Norm Johnson testified to the US Senate last year:

“We will lose these forests to catastrophic disturbance events unless we undertake aggressive active management programs... Without action, we are at high risk of losing these stands—and the residual old-growth trees that they contain—to fire and insects... Inaction is a much more risky option for a variety of ecological values, including preservation of Northern Spotted Owls and other old-growth related species. We need to learn as we go, but we need to take action now. Furthermore, it is critical for stakeholders to understand that active management is necessary in stands with existing old-growth trees in order to reduce the risk that those trees will be lost.”

Restoration forestry is the art and science of returning forests to heritage conditions of fire resilient, open and park-like structures. Our forests today are often crowded thickets, overladen with fuels, and prone to catastrophic fires. Restoration forestry removes the excess fuels and puts forests back into their historic condition, as they existed before Euro-American contact.

Restoring historical conditions sustains forests by protecting them from total mortality canopy fires, by maintaining fire-resilient old-growth trees, and by enhancing the capacity of forests to grow trees to old ages.

Our old-growth trees arose under much different conditions than today. The forest development pathways of pre-Contact eras were not punctuated by catastrophic stand-replacing fires but instead were the outcomes of frequent, seasonal, light-burning fires in open, park-like forests. Those fires were largely anthropogenic (human-set by the indigenous residents). Because the fires of historic eras were frequent and seasonal, they gently removed fuels without killing all the trees. The widely-spaced trees thus survived repeated burning and grew to very old ages.

Modern fires in dense thickets, untempered by frequent, seasonal, anthropogenic fires, cause total tree mortality. No trees survive the infrequent holocausts, and so no trees attain old-growth status. In fact, modern fires routinely kill old-growth trees that withstood multiple fires in bygone eras. Modern fires, burning in dense, built-up fuel conditions, often convert heritage forests to more or less permanent brush fields

By restoring thicket forests to their historical norm of open, park-like conditions, and in addition

restoring historical anthropogenic fire regimes, forests can be saved from catastrophic incineration and conversion to brush.

Restoration forestry, applied at landscape scales, will make our forests safer and less prone to catastrophic, forest-replacing fires. Restoration forestry protects, maintains, and perpetuates habitat, heritage, wildlife, aesthetics, recreational uses, watershed values, economics, public health and safety, and every other forest characteristic valued by human beings.

5 Jan 2009, 7:01am

by [Larry H.](#)

Superb concise explanation, Mike! See, THIS is why the eco's just don't want to talk about forests. They can't back up their "beliefs" with sound science. Since they can't convince people to embrace Gaia and hope that "she" will "fix" things, they are willing to doom our forests to martyrdom in order to "change" the world. They continue to try and say that "global warming" is the biggest risk to our forests, while pointing at the vast acreages of dead forests.

I tend to think that the east coast ecos are the ones who think fires are good for the forests. Maybe they ARE, east of the Mississippi. Large wildfires rarely occur there, except when Florida dries out too much.

I think I read something by that guy when an eco put it before me. Funny how people put faith into someone offering just opinions when our most respected "forest-ologists" are ignored. Funny that they used to cite Franklin all the time before his epiphany. Didn't those guys release an updated position statement since the original testimony to Congress? I think they alienated some ecos with the first message. Sadly, they still don't think timber salvage is a good thing. Re-burns are now a dime a dozen, it seems. Maybe ole Jerry needs to get out into the woods more often, eh?

5 Jan 2009, 10:43am

by [Mike](#)

Larry — your point about the lack of expertise on the part of current eco-spokespersons is right on. Yahoos with zero science make up fables which then get printed in newspapers as if they had the slightest validity.

Zybach was quite kind to Weurthner, considering that one has a PhD and 40 years of professional experience and the other is a politically motivated wannabe with no scientific/forestry training whatsoever.

Normally credentials don't matter to me. If you're right, you're right, and vice versa, regardless of background. But in this case the contentions of the neophyte are so bizarre that it is appropriate to question his credentials .

5 Jan 2009, 12:49pm

by [Larry H.](#)

Oh, and I didn't mention how good Bob's piece was. Scientifically-enlightened people can see that we should not apply a blanket policy on our forests, as so many factors come into play in managing them back to their "natural" resiliency and function through restoration forestry. It takes a keen eye and mind to size up and analyze what a particular stand needs. Until people realize that we foresters can sustainably manage our forests back to their original splendor through careful management and sound science, our forests will continue to suffer.

AND, still no plans from the Obama Team on how to deal with this disaster that dwarfs Katrina. Where is the urgency??!!? Where is the carbon sequestration??!!? Where is the Endangered Species Act??!!? All of their rhetoric and blather does nothing to address the science that shows our forests are dying from a lack of human intervention and eco-ignorance.

Thanks for the impressive writing, Bob. Also, displaying your credentials will help those who have open minds to see the light. I'd be interested to see the Eugene radicals' pathetic rebuttals.

6 Jan 2009, 2:52pm

by YPmule

First of all - great story by BobZ - and agree with every word.

My PHD is in Post Hole Digging - I have no college credentials - yet I have eyes that can see. I get so frustrated that anytime "thinning" is brought up - the tree-huggers sue because they are afraid someone will make a buck off our forest. But this stupidity is endangering communities! A while back there was a news story about Salmon, Idaho starting up small diameter wood processing - to handle what would be thinned around their community. It was supposed to help bring jobs to a dead logging community. Well the tree-huggers couldn't stand that and sued. Here is the result:

FS settles with enviro group in Idaho timber suit

Associated Press - January 3, 2009 [[here](#)]

BOISE, Idaho (AP) - The U.S. Forest Service settled a lawsuit by environmentalists fighting a proposed timber sale near the central Idaho town of Salmon by agreeing to scale back logging that was meant to reduce fuels.

In May, the Alliance for the Wild Rockies won an order from U.S. District Court Judge Edward Lodge to halt the Salmon National Forest's Moose Creek timber sale, which had been approved in 2006.

According to the pact signed this week, work will now be limited to timber cutting in

several areas that a local logger had purchased before the lawsuit was filed in 2007.

The Salmon National Forest also agreed to apply heightened scrutiny to future commercial logging operations - until it updates the plan it uses to manage its territory.

The Forest Service also must pay the environmental group's \$23,000 legal bill.

I don't want my tax dollars spent in this manner!

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[\*\*\*SOSF Photo Page 1: Boise and Payette Post-2007 fires\*\*\*](#)

[\*\*\*SOSF Photo Page 2: Sierra Nevada Post-Fires\*\*\*](#)

## Colloquia

[\*\*\*History of Western Landscapes\*\*\*](#)

[\*\*\*Forest and Fire Sciences\*\*\*](#)

[\*\*\*Restoration Forestry\*\*\*](#)