

Fire and Forest

Lessons

by Mike Esnard

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We are all glad that our town was unharmed by the Mountain Fire, but I don't want to celebrate too much. I don't want us to draw the wrong lesson, which is that fire agencies will always have the personnel and equipment to save us. After all, can't they just keep pulling in more and more resources until the fire is stopped in its tracks?

I am guessing they can't. Did you read about another big fire in the region that desperately needed people and planes that week? Yeah, neither did I. We were the big show at the time. They needed big aircraft to drop retardant and they got them. They needed lots of fire fighters and they got them. But what would have happened if there was a big fire burning toward the subdivisions in San Diego? Remember 2003 and 2007--huge fires burning in many places? In that situation I doubt we are getting 3,400 fire fighters, or the exclusive use of the DC-10 and two C-130s.

Then there was the weather. It rained on the fire. Could they have controlled it without the rain? I don't know. But it seems we were pretty lucky to get a storm that brought moisture rather than a lot of wind from the east.

I love organizations that can get big things done, and I deeply admire the ability of the agencies to come together in days and put thousands of people to effective, well-coordinated work. It's wonderful. It requires planning, experience, intelligence, and courage.

But while we acknowledge that, our minds should be on what could have been done to prevent the fire, or to keep it small. The lesson should be about doing what the Zen Center and Fleming Ranch did to not lose a building, though they were in the path of the fire.

Bonita Vista has been a target of Forest Service concern for years. They did some large fuels projects, but wanted to do more. Preliminary analysis indicates the work they did slowed the fire and helped save many homes in the area. What if they had been allowed to do what they intended?

The cost of suppressing the fire is somewhere around \$30 million. What would have happened if we had taken a tenth of that amount to apply towards fuel reduction in critical areas in the last two years?

I realize that prevention is not sexy and does not command the rapt attention of a giant fire fight. Our brains evolved, sensibly enough, to treat the danger in front of us more importantly than the danger imagined in the future. But the logic is undeniable. If we are going to live in places like this, fire prevention, both in town and in the surrounding forest, should be our ongoing concern and a constant activity.

The Forest Service and Cal Fire need consistent fuel budgets to apply to the forest. The benefits of fuels projects showed not just in Bonita Vista, but in the wilderness. I was told that the fire burned around two old fires, the Apache fire and Tahquitz II. Prescribed burns in the wilderness should be back on the table.

Idyllwild-Pine Cove survived unscathed, but we were lucky. Change the wind, cut out the rain, and something very different, and very painful, might have happened. We are not going to come to terms with wildland fire until we provide the agencies with the means for serious and ongoing prevention.