

2007 fire illustrates need to thin trees, some say

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GREENVILLE – A fire lookout spotted the smoke on Labor Day, and air tankers were making drops on the flames within 20 minutes.

But the September 2007 blaze that came to be known as the Moonlight fire quickly spread through dense, dry timber. Over the next two weeks, it cut a ferocious swath through Plumas County's forests, ultimately destroying more than 65,000 acres.

In part because the land hadn't been logged in many years, the fire moved faster and burned hotter than most forest fires, quickly moving from tinder-dry underbrush to smaller dead trees and finally to the tops of the most towering pines.

For years, timber harvesting on public lands has been stymied by concerns about logging's environmental damage. But now more than a few former timber workers who have visited the site wonder whether the fire could have been stopped sooner if they'd been able to thin out some of that wood years ago.

"The Moonlight fire is compelling us to rethink how we manage our forests and how we relate to the forest," said Jonathan Kusel of the Sierra Institute, a natural resource sociologist in Taylorsville who has studied timber-dependent rural communities for more than 20 years.

"I'm not saying we need to go back to the days of clear-cutting," said Kusel, who spent two days on the front lines fighting the blaze. "But we have to manage our forests and look at our forests differently. The Moonlight fire proved that."

Although wildfires have been part of the Western landscape for centuries, recent studies have tied climate changes in heat and moisture throughout the West to fires that burn higher and hotter. The Moonlight fire, fueled by heavy brush and timber, burned so hot that it even incinerated the soil.

Nearly two years later, much of the land is still desolate. On the public land that burned, thousands of acres of dead trees stand ready to fall in a strong wind. But in other areas, there are signs of life.

The fire also destroyed a thousand acres of private forest land managed by Jim Chapin, a private forester from Red Bluff. Chapin designed a so-called "sustained yield plan" for the Engel-mine forest in which crews cut only as many trees as the forest could regenerate.

"We only did selective harvesting, and the forest looked great and it was more productive," Chapin said.

It's the kind of forest that has a better chance of surviving a fire. But the Engelmine forest was surrounded by national forests that hadn't been thinned in years. So when the Moonlight fire

tore through the tangled forests around it, the Engelmine forest also went up in flames.

But the private forest is coming back. Chapin got the burned timber removed and sold, and this spring he led a crew that planted more than 60,000 seedlings. Some of the native plants are also returning.

"It's already getting pretty vegetated," Chapin said.

Thinning forests aids fire survival

A managed forest's ability to survive a fire is clearly illustrated 15 miles from where the Moonlight fire started, at the Collins Almanor forest in Chester. Like the Engelmine forest, the Collins forest is managed on a sustained-yield plan. In fact, according to Jay Francis, the forest manager for the Collins Pine Co., there is more timber standing in the Collins forest today than when the company bought its land and began logging in Plumas County in 1902.

On the day the Moonlight fire started, a human-caused blaze ignited in the Collins forest. It burned for about 10 hours before crews reached it, but they were able to extinguish it quickly.

The difference, Francis said, was that the forest had been carefully thinned for years. There were no so-called "ladder fuels" – underbrush and small, dead trees that allow a ground fire to climb up to the bigger trees. So while the Moonlight fire was tearing through thousands of acres of dense, untended stands of timber, the Collins fire was contained to just 3 acres.

"In some ways I wished the Moonlight fire had been closer to civilization ... to remind folks what we need to be doing to manage our forests," Francis said.

Many oppose clear-cutting

The timber industry has a long history in Plumas County. Lumber became the area's leading commodity after the mines gave out in the early 1900s. At its peak, a dozen or more sawmills operated in the region.

Scott Lawson, a former logger who is now director of the Plumas County Museum in Quincy, recently published a book about the history of logging in Plumas County. Lawson says "heavy-handed harvesting" in the early 1980s led to too many clear-cuts that sparked stricter environmental regulations. Those rules – and lawsuits from environmental groups – made logging unprofitable for many operators. Today, there are just two sawmills operating in Plumas County.

Lawson, who logged from 1978 to 1989, drove to work in a pickup with a bumper sticker that read: "Stop Clear Cuts." In fact, many loggers disliked the clear-cuts because they pride themselves on knowing how to remove certain trees while keeping the forest alive and productive. Clear-cutting took no special skill at all.

"I got where I didn't want to do it anymore," Lawson said. "We were seeing the complete and utter destruction of nice forests."

That history makes events like the Moonlight fire especially painful for communities like Greenville, Chester and other Plumas County hamlets, where former loggers wonder what would have happened if they'd been allowed to thin out some trees.

"Seventy sawmills have closed down since the mid-1980s in California, and it's primarily because of the inability to get timber off national forest land," said Chapin, the Red Bluff forester. "Many small communities have suffered, and when fires like this come along, the people suffer just a little more."

Devastating fire studied

Still, as the green starts to reappear in the ashes of the Moonlight fire, despair is being replaced by what Kusel of the Sierra Institute called an "air of hopefulness."

With the institute's help, students from Greenville frequently visit the burned areas to study fire ecology, ecological recovery and forest management. The first field trip was just two months after the fire.

Last year the institute widened its field trips to the general public.

People are shocked, Kusel said, but their guides point out the oaks sprouting from roots and the ground cover that's returning. One woman, stunned to learn the devastation was due in part to an unmanaged forest, declared, "I'll never hug a tree again."

"What she was saying," Kusel said, "is that she now understood that it isn't always a crime to cut down a tree."

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