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New Report Debunks Myth of “Catastrophic Wildfire”

By Matthew Koehler, New West Unfiltered 2-03-10

There is no such thing as "catastrophic wildfire" in our forests, ecologically speaking. That is the central conclusion of a report released this week by the John Muir Project (JMP), a non-profit forest research and conservation organization.

The report, "The Myth of Catastrophic Wildfire: A New Ecological Paradigm of Forest Health", is a comprehensive synthesis of the scientific evidence regarding wildland fire and its relationship to biodiversity and climate change in western U.S. forests. It stands many previously held assumptions on their heads, including the assumptions that forest fires burn mostly at high intensity (where most trees are killed), and that fires are getting more intense, as well as the assumption that high-intensity fire areas are ecologically damaged or harmed. The report finds that the scientific evidence contradicts these popular notions.

"We do not need to be afraid of the effects of wildland fire in our forests. Fire is doing important and beneficial ecological work," said the report's author, Dr. Chad Hanson, a forest and fire ecologist who is the Director of the John Muir Project, as well as a researcher at the University of California at Davis. "It may seem counterintuitive, but the scientific evidence is telling us that some of the very best and richest wildlife habitat in western U.S. forests occurs where fire kills most or all of the trees. These areas are relatively rare on the landscape, and the many wildlife species that depend upon the habitat created by high-intensity fire are threatened by fire suppression and post-fire logging."

The report notes that hundreds of millions of dollars are being needlessly spent each year suppressing fires in remote forests and implementing widespread "forest thinning" logging projects. This puts firefighters at unnecessary risk in remote wild areas, puts homes at greater risk by diverting scarce resources away from efforts to create defensible space around structures, and further threatens the many rare and imperiled wildlife species that depend upon post-fire habitat.

Specifically, the report finds:

• There is far less fire now in western U.S. forests than there was historically.

• Current fires are burning mostly at low intensities, and fires are not getting more intense, contrary to many assumptions about the effects of climate change. Forested areas in which fire has been excluded for decades by fire suppression are also not burning more intensely.

• Contrary to popular assumptions, high-intensity fire (commonly mislabeled as "catastrophic wildfire") is a natural and necessary part of western U.S. forest ecosystems, and there is less high-intensity fire now than there was historically, due to fire suppression.

• Patches of high-intensity fire (where most or all trees are killed) support among the highest levels of wildlife diversity of any forest type in the western U.S., and many wildlife species depend upon such habitat. Post-fire logging and ongoing fire suppression policies are threatening these species.

• Conifer forests naturally regenerate vigorously after high-intensity fire.

• Our forests are functioning as carbon sinks (net sequestration) where logging has been reduced or halted, and wildland fire helps maintain high productivity and carbon storage.

• Even large, intense fires consume less than 3% of the biomass in live trees, and carbon emissions from forest fires is only tiny fraction of the amount resulting from fossil fuel consumption (even these emissions are balanced by carbon uptake from forest growth and regeneration).

• "Thinning" operations for lumber or biofuels do not increase carbon storage but, rather, reduce it, and thinning designed to curb fires further threatens imperiled wildlife species that depend upon post-fire habitat.

• The only effective way to protect homes from wildland fire is to use non-combustible roofing and other materials, and reduce brush within 100-200 feet of structures.