



# PLAYING WITH FIRE

*With no scientific  
feedback process Forest  
Service firebugs in  
Grand Canyon country  
are stuck on stupid.*

*Story and photos by  
Steven H. Rich*

## Have they burned your forest yet?

That's a fair question ever since the Clinton administration and trendy, activist academicians began packing the U.S. Forest Service with people who believe fire can do no harm. Please understand that they are planning hot-weather burns in your forest. The odds are that many of them will escape.

Huge destructive escaped hot-season "management" burns have gone on unchallenged for years. Federal agencies are now demonstrating a reckless disregard for biodiversity, endangered species, wildlife in general, soils, watersheds and everything else they're supposed to preserve. Their pro-fire, damn-the-consequences attitude shows utter contempt for the extreme sacrifices rural people expend in the cause of protecting nature and endangered species. They are casually consuming values that conscientious government and local people have worked generations to

create. It's a blazing orgy of death and destruction, and they smugly call it "natural." The doctrinaire "Green" agenda is really a smoking black one.

Now the North Kaibab is bleeding from deep burns. Black floods 150 feet wide rush through meadows and canyons as fire-crust-ed slopes shed desperately needed rains in torrential ash and soil-filled flows. Water holes fill with ash and a caustic solution of lye and water. Aquatic organisms cannot survive. Nothing can drink. The floods repeatedly roar 25 miles across bone-dry Houserock Val-

ley into the Colorado River. The Colorado runs black for days after rains—from Marble Canyon through the Grand Canyon to Lake Mead. This inevitable post-fire disaster always continues for years.

Abnormal post-fire flood flows typically last seven to 14 years and more, according to scientists' fire research quoted in a Forest Service General Technical Report (RMRS-GTR-63-2000, Peter Robichaud, Jan Beyers and Dan Neary). Recovery, the report states, can take centuries and may never fully happen. It further states that Southwestern fires commonly increase peak storm flows 500 percent to 9,600 percent. Fire-caused floods 35,000 percent worse than pre-fire runoff have been measured. By contrast, the same Forest Service document says that even logging every tree in a clear cut—which activists revile as a fish-killing obscenity—temporarily increases peak flows only a comparatively insignificant

average of 25 percent to 100 percent over runoff from undisturbed woodland. The public is never told these facts.

On June 18, 2006, forest rangers found a lightning-strike fire about 30 inches across in the upper Warm Springs canyon area of the North Kaibab district. They could have put it out by stepping on it. Instead, they were ordered, under a delirious interpretation of “Wildland Fire-Use Policy,” to let it burn. Drought maps showed the area in red—severe drought—a cross between a tinderbox and a sea of gasoline. The Forest Service had prohibited the public from using open flames in Kaibab National Forest.

John Chambers, for eight years the Forest Service national office chief of fire operations called the hot, dry-season, let-burn decision and the agency’s refusal to manage forest fuels through harvesting and thinning “stupid.” He wrote: “If the only fuel management tool you have is a match, sooner or later you’ll be in deep sh&@!”

The “management” fire showed high severity ground fire characteristics early on. Tons of heavy fallen logs per acre burned to ashes. Forest-floor organics burned so hot that the green pine needles boiled internally on thousands of tall (now dead) pines—which can then play host to lethal bark-beetle infestations. Grass root crowns were fatally incinerated on thousands of acres.

All this alarmed new fire-control officers not at all, despite the fact the blaze kept crossing “action lines” drawn to protect northern goshawks. They just made more lines. A bizarre double standard was officially revealed later when, according to Forest Service sources, a Native American forest ranger was expected to pay for a new Bobcat tractor that

burned up. He parked it six miles from the fire area. His superiors said he should have known it was obviously unsafe.

Experienced locals—many of them trained fire fighters and/or former forest rangers—warned that the horribly dangerous fire *should* have been extinguished *immediately*. As they predicted, the fire boiled up into a desolating cataclysm. It formed a gigantic thundercloud made of water blasted from drought-stricken grass, flowers, trees, soils and the bodies of burned wildlife. The cloud collapsed in the early morning instantly spreading the fire for miles.

This burned area includes approximately 25 percent of the core habitat of the white-tailed Kaibab squirrel—found nowhere else on earth. The burning certainly consumed young flightless goshawks in their nests. Most young Kaibab squirrels



ABOVE: Critical to wildlife, aspen groves average 2,000 lbs. of grass and flowers per acre. BELOW: Severe ground fire has killed all the trees. Aspens resprout, but watershed stabilization and full use of wildlife takes from decades to centuries.



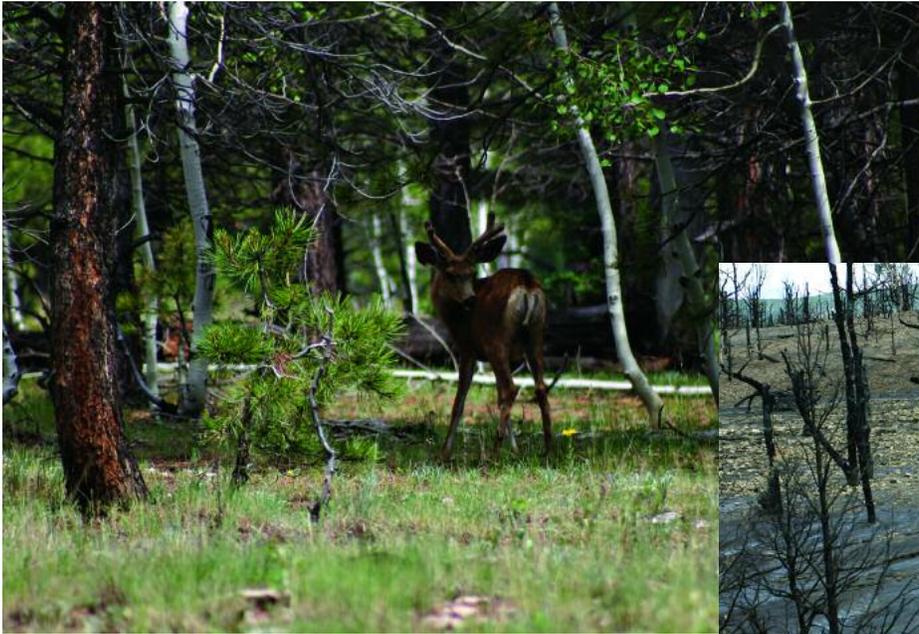
and other newborn animals such as hawks, foxes, owls, rabbits, porcupines, coyotes, songbirds, bobcats, golden eagles, woodpeckers, deer, Arizona tiger salamanders, chipmunks and other federally protected species could not have escaped.

It burned rare Kaibab pediocacti (also found nowhere else), and potential Mexican spotted owl habitat. All wildlife were exposed to wildfire in a pincers movement. The “management phase” fire still burned on top of the mountain while the escaped wildfire phase roared up the forested east slopes—trapping and confusing even adults between the two blazes. Then it turned southwest into the mixed conifer high country—goshawk central.

The North Kaibab Plateau forms the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, known for its serene forested beauty surrounded by desert. It is also home to the densest breeding population of rare northern goshawks on



Every tree in this photo is dead or dying. Washes up to 40 feet deep have been cut by flood waters roaring off this ruined watershed. In soil sterilized 2 to 6 inches deep by severe fire, most grass, flowers, endangered goshawks and other federally protected wildlife are dead. Forest Service has no money for rehabilitation.



*LEFT: The Kaibab Plateau is famous as a mule deer haven. Mule deer are in decline around the West due to a loss of habitat to development (particularly winter range), tough weather, and competition from elk. BELOW: The fate of this important deer habitat is uncertain. There are no plans to do anything about the loss of forage and ongoing ruin of the watershed. Floods rip soils and even boulders off the mountain and blast them all the way to the Colorado River 25 miles away.*



earth. Their success is due to decades of careful, conscientious select-cut logging by Kaibab Industries in partnership with foresters and biologists from the pre-Clinton Forest Service. It opened biological deserts of over-dense trees into paradises of diversity.

In the adjacent unlogged Grand Canyon National Park far fewer goshawks dwell in narrow strips on points of the canyon's rim and forest edges. In the long-logged national forest the hawks penetrate every wooded habitat—even into piñon/juniper woodland treated with openings for wildlife and cattle.

The fire ruined tens of thousands of acres of excellent goshawk country. Researcher Richard Reynolds and others (U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research) have learned goshawks need multiage forest mosaics just like those created by select-cut bio-planned logging. They avoid even-age tree stands because they lack diverse prey species and starve the goshawks out. Only even-age stands of trees *can* grow back after stand-replacing fires.

Kaibab Industries was driven out of business because it had produced so many goshawks that logging operations were never out of sight or hearing of them. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service officers insisted the birds could not bear sights, sounds and disturbances they had thrived with for years. Hundreds of families in job-starved northern Arizona and southern Utah lost their livelihoods.

The 58,000-acre fire came within a scant 14 miles of the Grand Canyon. More than a thousand travelers and staff were trapped by 100-foot flames across Highway 67—the only

paved way out. They had to be evacuated on dirt back roads.

Hundreds could have died if not for favorable winds and providential weeks-early rains.

The district fire management officer wondered on regional TV (KSL-Salt Lake City) what the big deal was.

"In two or three hundred years it will look just the same," he glibly opined. "A human lifetime's just a blip on the radar screen." He didn't mention endangering hundreds of such blips, including his own crews, the \$8 million suppression cost, a similar cost for rehabilitation, the half-billion dollars in lumber or the dead wildlife and habitats.

Smelling cover-up, respected experts are challenging the agency spin. They scoff at



*Dozens of critical wildlife waters were filled with ashes up to 2 feet deep and a caustic lye/water solution. Nothing can drink. Arizona tiger salamanders and other aquatic organisms died.*

claims that "65 percent burned at low severity." After viewing the ruin, a former highly placed Forest Service employee E-mailed: "The folks I was with said they had *never* seen such devastation over such a large contiguous area—certainly I haven't. . . . If this had been a simple 'wildfire' and not a 'fire use fire' gone bad, with the same results, the Forest Service would have been talking about the huge amounts of resource damage being done; esthetic values being lost on the way to the Canyon; wildlife losses on the [Grand Canyon National] Game Preserve; years to replace the lost resource, etc., to justify the huge suppression costs that were being incurred."

To locals it was arrogant cynicism when Forest Service P.R. people called this tragedy the "Warm Fire." They're contacting Congress. They wonder why locals can't even startle a goshawk in the process of vastly improving their habitat if the Forest Service can cook 'em in the process of destroying it. Locals could go to jail under Section 9 of the Endangered Species Act and be fined millions for a particle of the damage this fire caused. There are no consequences to those who let it happen.

Under any objective standard, either continual years with vast acreages burned by escaped hot-weather catastrophic fires are ecological disasters, or the Endangered Species Act, National Environmental Policy Act, Forest Service Organic Act (the one that says they're to preserve the forest) and the

Administrative Procedures Act are just bitter, contemptuous jokes on the rural populace and a trusting American public. The consequences of these destructive hot-weather fires destroy protected species and their habitats as well as ecological conditions protected by these acts. The scale by which they violate the intent of those acts dwarfs any damage the very worst industrial activity creates. This unexamined “naturalness” fetish is running amok.

There are no words to express the biological weirdness of this “fire is always good” attitude. When soils form water-resistant crusts, they lose all surface organics and are *sterilized* to a depth of two inches—killing even the most fire-tolerant grasses. In firespeak, this is called a moderate event. Even high-severity fires which consume logs, form worse crusts, alter the soil’s physical structure and sterilize them six inches deep and more are imagined to be natural, beneficial and even ecologically necessary.

Calling fires burning in 100-year-fire-suppression fuel-loads “natural” is crazy. In the words of playwright Christopher Marlowe: “Such reasons make noon night and dark night day.” The previous big Kaibab fire—the Bridger Fire Complex left (after the flood phase) large areas covered with nonnative annual cheatgrass replacing dozens of native perennial plant species. Was that beneficial or natural?

The famous Yellowstone Fire—sold to the public as the best thing since bald eagles—left tens of thousands of acres in close-packed, stunted lodgepole pine monocultures with no grass, no flowers and no wildlife. Beneficial? Hardly. Natural? Not that either.

No amount of ideological naturalness can equal the lost value of vast areas of biodiverse, wildlife-filled, stable forest. Native Americans learned that ages ago. They used cool, wet-season prescribed fire to prevent catastrophic wildfire (see “Pristine Nature: the Founding Falsehood” in *RANGE*, Spring 2005 and “Bless the Beasts and the Children” in *RANGE*, Spring 2006). Lightning strikes usually made *little* fires. The Forest Service used to follow their example. Now fire-happy federal officers believe a simplistic upside-down cascading academic fallacy that ignores Native American history and biological reality. They say: “Hot weather has highest fire danger so most fires happened

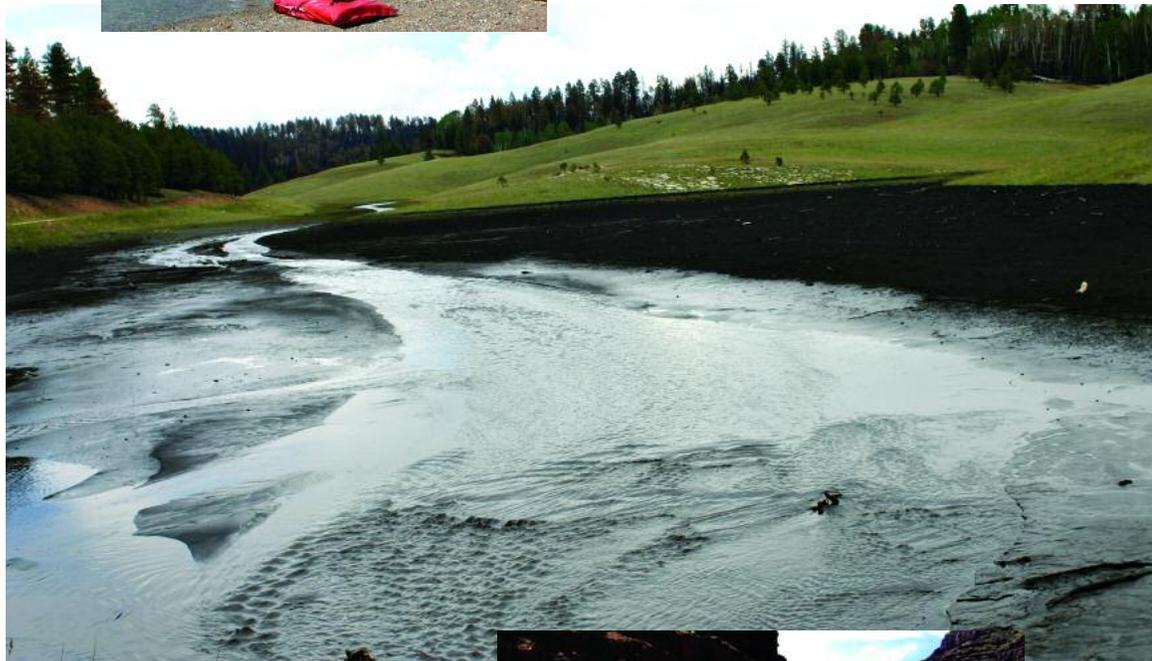
then so that’s natural/necessary.” Necessary to what? There’s nothing hot-weather fires can do that cool/wet-season fires or logging/fuel-wood harvest/biomass harvest/thinning followed by cool-season fire can’t do 10 to 10,000 times better. Don’t be absurd. No organism is or ever will be adapted to being killed or vaporized.

Folks in the small towns of Kanab and Fredonia and others around the West could do a much better job managing the Kaibab Plateau and other forests than the Forest Service can under lawsuit-skewed, politically cor-

rect pressures and policies. We and many others love the Kaibab Forest. We’ve cared for it; cherished it. Many of our best memories were in places the Warm Fire destroyed. We spent childhoods and lifetimes there and took our kids there to fill their lives with beauty. It’s unspeakably painful to see the destruction. Don’t tell us it will be O.K. in 300 years. ■

*Steve Rich, president of Rangeland Restoration Academy in Salt Lake City, Utah, can be reached at <steve@rangelandrestoration.org>.*

**NOTE: PLEASE CALL YOUR CONGRESSIONAL REPRESENTATIVES AND SENATORS. ASK FOR A REVIEW OF FEDERAL HOT-SEASON FIRE POLICY AND INVESTIGATIONS OF WHY THE FOREST SERVICE REFUSES TO USE THE BEST AVAILABLE MANAGEMENT TOOLS IN IMPLEMENTING THE HEALTHY FORESTS RESTORATION ACT AND WHY THE MEDIA FAIL TO INVESTIGATE.**



*TOP: Crystal clear water at Lees’ Ferry on the Colorado River.*

*ABOVE: Even the heaviest rains normally create no runoff in this Kaibab Plateau meadow. Since the “Warm Fire,” repeated floods have covered this valley with black water and ashes.*

*BOTTOM: Boaters in the Grand Canyon awoke to find the Colorado River black with polluting flood waters pouring off devastated forest land. The black muck travels all the way to Lake Mead in Nevada.*

