

FIRE IN ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT: SHIFTING THE PARADIGM FROM SUPPRESSION TO PRESCRIPTION

By TOM ZIMMERMAN

HELD IN BOISE, IDAHO, LAST May, the 20th Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference continues to be the single best source of information and debate on wildland fire management in the country. The conference is an outgrowth of the fire ecology series initiated by the Tall Timbers Research Station in 1962. This series began and has continued for 34 years primarily as a determined educational effort. The principal goal has been to create an environment where the results of research and experience can be presented and documented to form a solid foundation for fostering a more intelligent and productive course of wildland fire and resource management. All 19 previous conferences have published proceedings that have markedly increased the state of knowledge regarding wildland fire management. Cosponsors of the conference included the Tall Timbers Research Station, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management.

Since the first conference in 1962, land managers have shifted their thinking and subsequent management practices from a one-dimensional approach of total fire



Figure 1. One of the first, large, long-duration prescribed natural fires to be managed on an interagency basis on both Forest Service and National Park Service lands, the Coyote Fire burned in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, last August.

and negative effects of past management practices. While we have succeeded in preserving expansive tracts of forest resources, aggressive and increasingly sophisticated fire suppression techniques have been responsible for such negative effects as changes in stand structure and age-class distributions, and increased ac-

trends, accelerated fuel accumulations, and other effects of prolonged fire exclusion.

Given the scope and importance of these ecological concerns, this conference was extremely relevant to today's manager. This year's conference was one of the best attended in the series, with over 300 participants from countries around the world. The agenda included 10 sessions with more than 100 presenters of oral papers, poster papers, and panel discussions. Topics included prescribed fire and risk assessment; pre-

scribed fire in the western and southeastern United States; prescribed fire and avian communities; international perspectives; fire, silviculture, and ecosystem management; and, political and philosophical issues and their limits on pre-

Fire suppression has changed forest stand structure, age-class distributions, and accumulations of fuels to cause a decline in ecosystem health, particularly in the western United States.

control to a more multidimensional role of incorporating fire suppression and prescribed fire use into wildland fire management (figure 1). This shift has been largely due to the increased understanding of the role fire plays as a natural process. As our knowledge has increased, we have been able to identify both positive

accumulations of woody fuels, all of which are combining to cause a large-scale decline in ecosystem health, particularly in the western United States. Considerable effort and attention has been focused on the need to increase prescribed fire applications to combat unhealthy ecological

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scribed fire. Individual presentations were varied and meaningful. They described the most current techniques and procedures for wildland fire management, state-of-knowledge summaries, and new technologies including computer software.

Of particular interest was the panel discussion on political and philosophical limitations to prescribed fire. Panel members presented a stimulating exchange highlighted by Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt's charge to reach a consensus among land users and to strive to make prescribed fire more effective and successful. Another panel member, while describing limitations to prescribed fire in a lighthearted fashion, may have actually given the most succinct summation when he stated that fear, greed, ignorance, and apathy are the principal limitations to increased prescribed fire application.

Several intriguing field trips augmented the formal presentation portion of the conference. These included tours of the National Interagency Fire Center; the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area; the World Center for Birds of Prey; and past, present, and future fire management considerations on the Boise National Forest.

The 20th Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference dealt with an important topic for present and future wildland fire management. Information shared will be valuable now and for years to come in enhancing understanding, learning, and application of management actions. Conference organizers should be proud as this conference achieved the goal of creating an environment where research and experience could be shared to further success and productivity in wildland fire and resource management. The sum and substance of the conference will be captured through peer-reviewed papers that will be published in a formal proceedings available during 1997.

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Tom Zimmerman is a Fire Management Specialist with the Fire Management Program Center unit of the NPS National Interagency Fire Center. His phone number is (208) 387-5215.