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Fire Effects in Southwestern Forests

Proceedings of the Second La Mesa Fire Symposium

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Abstract: In 1977, the La Mesa Fire burned across 15,444 acres of ponderosa pine forests on the adjoining lands of Bandelier National Monument, the Santa Fe National Forest, and Los Alamos National Laboratory. Following this event, several fire effects studies were initiated. The 16 papers herein document longer-term knowledge gained about the ecological effects of the fire and about Southwestern fire ecology in general. The presentations are also designed to give resource managers practical information for managing fire in local landscapes. Studies presented range from fire histories and avifauna to geomorphology and arthropods.

Keywords: fire history, fire management, flood history, elk, arthropods, fungi

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Management Lessons of the La Mesa Fire

Milford R. Fletcher¹

When I was asked to summarize the management lessons learned from the La Mesa fire, I thought to myself that this would be a short discussion. Staff and management changes often leave Parks and National Forests with little historical or institutional knowledge of past events such as floods or fire. As a result, historical and institutional memory are lost. Additionally, many managers are not completely aware of the powerful influences that fire has on ecosystems, and the consequences of a "hands off" philosophy in fire management.

For example, in the mid-1970's the Southwest regional office of the National Park Service gathered fire managers and superintendents together with noted fire researchers to learn new techniques and research regarding fire management. E.V. Komarek of the Tall Timbers Research Institute was one of the speakers, and, in his dynamic way, he pointed out the benefits of fire management and the consequences of immediately extinguishing all fires. When the conference was over, Deputy Director (NPS) Ted Thompson came to me and expressed his concern. He had spent his entire career "protecting" park resources from fire, only to find out later that his efforts were not only misguided, but actually harmful to the very resources he was dedicated to protect.

The contrast between then and now is striking. National Park Service Deputy Regional Director Mary Bradford opened this conference, and welcomed the knowledge that this symposium will bring to public land managers. She charged land managers to use that knowledge in the planning of strategies to include fire as a natural component of ecosystem management. Today, I believe that most of our land managers are aware of the basic need to include fire considerations in many aspects of land management, from improving winter range for livestock and wildlife to managing cultural resources in the backcountry.

Unlike the 1970's, when much of the opposition to prescribed fire management came from within, the opposition now comes from outside the fire and management community - specifically from a

public which is largely ignorant of the role fire plays in the ecosystems of the Southwest. With the passage of the Clean Air Act smoke management has become a public issue, and blackened areas in parks or public forests always cause public comment.

I submit that the education process now needs to be broadened, from resources managers to the public in general. In New Mexico we have more than 25% of the population concentrated in one metropolitan area. We need to take every advantage to inform the public as to what we are doing and the rationale behind the decisions. At one time the Southwest Fire Council in cooperation with various fire management agencies had a booth at the State Fair, with a uniformed representative of an agency on duty to answer questions, hand out information, and generally meet and greet the public. This was a good idea, and still is. In 14 days we can meet over 300,000 citizens.

We *can* inform the public and change the way they perceive us and our management of fire. We taught the public to "pack it in, pack it out", and to recycle plastic, aluminum and so forth, and even educated them on very controversial subjects, like removing feral burros from Bandelier, Death Valley, and Grand Canyon to preserve the native ecosystems. This challenge is no greater than those we have faced in the past. Let's all go out and do what we can to tell our story, and make people understand why an occasional blackened forest or smoke cloud is not necessarily detrimental to the resources we manage and they enjoy.

In conclusion, I am extremely impressed by the volume and depth of the information which has resulted from the research on the La Mesa fire. It has exceeded our hopes when we started this project some 17 years ago. The data presented at this symposium provide a substantial basis for future interpretation and fire management activities in the Southwest. Now we need to interpret cryptogams and nitrogen cycles in terms of Bambi and

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bluebirds - subjects more familiar and dear to the public. In our interpretation of research data from the La Mesa Fire, we need to find common denominators with which the public can identify and associate, and proceed with the task of explaining the rationale behind fire management on public lands.

We have learned a great deal about the ecology of fire since the 1977 La Mesa Fire. I hope that we can all get together in 17 more years, in 2011, and share our continuing discoveries on the long-term effects of fire in the Southwest.