

Through the Haze: Twelve Basic Questions and Answers about Wildfire



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Was 2012 the worst fire year ever?

- Nope. Not by any measure we commonly use – number of fires, number of acres burned, loss of life, loss of residences.
- But it was a difficult season, especially in Idaho, where 1.76 million acres burned. That was the most of any state.



How do you put out wildfires?

- Anchor, flank and pinch on small fires and big fires.
- More complicated on big fires, but the tactics are about the same.
- Retardant doesn't put out fires. It slows them down, so that people in yellow shirts can put them out.
- Sometimes, Nature rules and the best we can do is just get out of the way.



Why don't you put out all wildfires?

- Some fires do more good than harm, when they are low-intensity, cleansing fires and mimic a natural or historical fire regime.
- Smokey Bear has been too effective through the years.
- The public seems confused by a mixed message. We get that.



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Why do wildfires seem to be getting bigger and more destructive?

- “The Three W’s” -- Wood, weather and WUI. WUI consists of people living in places prone to wildfire.
- Cheatgrass and other nasty invasive species contribute to the problem. That was especially true in 2012.



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Isn't the current situation mostly the fault of the old-timers who put out every fire as quickly as possible?

- No. They did what society demanded and science said would work.
- They've become scapegoats for some of the problems we face today.
- Much of how we suppress fires today was developed by previous generations – tactics, air support, tools and equipment. We owe them our thanks, not our scorn.

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What do you expect in the future – is 2012 the new normal?

- Maybe. Maybe even probably. But it isn't a straight-line progression.
- Quadrennial Fire Review predicts more fires, more acres, in more geographically diverse areas.
- More homes and entire communities in places that are historically prone to burning = more homes burning.



7 Does removing fuel work?

- ~~Sometimes.~~ Most of the time. It depends.
- So many people are in pursuit of the Holy Grail of fire management.
- The Holy Grail doesn't exist. If it did, we would have figured it out by now.



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Why should you fear embers more than flame if you have house in the forest?

- Jack Cohen's work tells us that embers are the main cause of buildings igniting, not so much structures coming in contact with flames.



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Did you notice the smoke in Boise this year?

- Well, duh.
- Simple explanation: We had lots of fire. We had fire to the west, to the east, to the north, and occasionally, to the south.
- No matter which way the wind blew, it brought smoke into the valley. And the valley acts as a smoke sink. It comes in and makes itself right at home.

Why is wildfire such a common topic in the news?

- It's visual
- It's seductive
- It's good political theater
- It is at its worst when the yearly news cycle bottoms out



Law and disorder: What legal questions do firefighters and managers face?

- Firefighter liability
- Billing responsible parties
- Mismanagement of fires, lawsuits concerning tactics that didn't work
- Retardant
- Abuse within the system – credit cards, overtime abuse, embezzling

What is the forecast for 2013?

- We are in a weak El Nino weather pattern, which means a slightly drier-and- warmer-than-usual winter in the Northwest.
- The fuels are pretty much already in place, so we expect an average to average-plus fire season in 2013 in the West.



What is the forecast for 2013?

- Other factors come into play:
 - Lightning frequency
 - Snowpack melt rate
 - Spring rain and snow showers
 - Pacific Ocean current oscillation
 - Melt-off in the Arctic ice mass
 - Solar reflectivity in the Arctic
 - And more factors that I don't understand



Questions?

Thanks