

Not a Question of if, but When: Legislature Lollygags while Fire Fuels Grow

Recent spring snows won't eliminate the serious wildfire season that Colorado faces this summer. Worse, state agencies can't help property owners in the "red zones" (where forests and subdivisions intermingle) remove dense undergrowth or dead and diseased trees near their homes. So, either property owners give up and don't attempt to mitigate against wildfires, or, if they already have cut down problem trees, the debris piles just sit there, like heaps of kindling awaiting a deadly spark. As long-time forest advocates, we know that that the crisis has become a near-certainty. We thus call upon Gov. John Hickenlooper and state legislators to let forest professionals help homeowners mitigate against wildfires.

We're not talking about tree cutting in wilderness areas. We're speaking of landscapes very close to towns, major roads, and other human development – places such as the Front Range foothills. We're also not discussing the national forests or national parks, which are federally controlled. Instead, we focus on public safety on about 6 million "red zone" acres inhabited by about 2 million Coloradans.

The situation, brewing for decades, recently has grown worse. Colorado's forests evolved with wildfires that periodically cleared out dead and diseased trees, removing fuel for truly big fires. That cycle of small fires let native species re-grow properly. But during the 20th Century, forest managers wrongly snuffed out these small, beneficial fires so now, many Colorado forests are crowded sick trees and overly dense undergrowth – perfect fuel for a big wildfire.

These days, forest professionals preach the wisdom of removing scraggly forest growth to reduce the risks of huge wildfires in the "red zones." That tactic proved itself in 2002, when the massive Hayman Fire southwest of metro Denver – which roared for days through forests that held just this sort of excessive fuel – hit a big area where the U.S. Forest Service had removed dead trees and dense undergrowth. The fire stopped racing through the tree tops and dropped to the ground, enabling firefighters to contain it. (Later, a wind shift took the flames safely into the nearby wilderness.)

But here's the catch: after crews cut down scraggly trees and other wildfire fuel, they then also must remove the debris from the landscape -- otherwise, all that work just creates giant kindling piles. The most economical and effective way to do so is to burn the debris piles when snow is on the ground and winds are light. Federal agencies and neighboring states (like Wyoming and Arizona) routinely burn the debris piles when conditions are safe.

But Colorado – because state agencies no longer have governmental immunity that would let them to provide this service. Five years ago, [the Denver Post reported](#) that about 180,000 hazardous debris piles have built up statewide, but the problem has intensified since then.

State agencies (particularly the Colorado State Forest Service, which possesses the necessary expertise)- lost immunity from lawsuits a few years ago, after high winds spread flames from burning debris and ignited a [deadly blaze](#). But the supposed cure is worse than the initial problem: the loss of state agency immunity, and the hypersensitive politics that resulted, have left landowners and small communities either unable to mitigate against wildfire, or stuck them with huge debris piles. Whatever improvement our elected leaders assumed would accrue, the revocation of state agency immunity has, in reality, created a far worse, and much more widespread, danger.

Colorado needs better tools to prevent big wildfires in the “red zones,” and burning debris piles (during proper condition) is one of them. We should give our professional foresters the right authority and in so doing, encourage private landowners to continue fire prevention work.

The Forest Health Advisory Council, represents broad interests in Colorado, supports the return of governmental immunity for prescribed fire and pile burning.

We hope the Governor will strongly encourage Tony Frank (president of Colorado State University, which oversees the Colorado State Forest Service) to assist in re-establishing this important tool.

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