

The Irrationality of Continued Fire Suppression: A Partial Analysis of the Costs and Benefits of Restoration-Based Fuel Reduction Treatments vs. No Treatment

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Abstract—In 1905, the Bureau of Forestry became the U.S. Forest Service and was given responsibility for protecting newly designated forest reserves. A critical part of its charge was the prevention and control of fires. In 1908 Congress set up a unique system, like an open checkbook, that assured payment for fire suppression as needed. Since that time the fire suppression checkbook has never run out of blank checks and federal land management agencies continue to spend orders of magnitude more money on suppression than on pre-fire fuel control. We argue that the perpetuation of this pattern represents an irrational investment in the further disruption of fire cycles and the continued depreciation of forest values. We present results of an economic analysis comparing restoration-based fuel treatments to no treatments for areas identified at high risk for crown fire to support our claim. The with and without treatment comparison focuses on ponderosa pine and dry mixed conifer forest ecosystems in Arizona and New Mexico (Forest Service Region 3). The analysis provides a conservative estimate of the potential economic losses due to no action.