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The California Chaparral Institute

...the voice of the chaparral

www.californiachaparral.org

Large Fires Natural and Inevitable in Southern California

Excessive fuel treatments can increase fire danger

SAN DIEGO, *Calif.* – Recent news articles and editorial commentary have suggested that the US Forest Service is partially responsible for the Station Fire in Los Angeles County because it failed to “clear underbrush” in the Angeles National Forest. “The Station Fire is not the fault of federal land managers, firefighters, or environmental laws,” said Richard Halsey, director of the California Chaparral Institute. “Huge wildfires will occur in Southern California regardless of how the government ‘manages’ its lands...they are an inevitable part of life here.”

Many fire scientists are deeply concerned by the amount of misinformation being released in response to the latest wildfires. “To state that the Station Fire could have been prevented if the Forest Service had only completed its planned “underbrush” clearance operations or prescribed burns in the National Forest indicates a profound misunderstanding of our region’s fire-prone environment,” Halsey said. “The San Gabriel Mountains are covered primarily by chaparral, not forest. There is no ‘underbrush’ in chaparral since the entire ecosystem is composed of native shrubs. Calling this area a ‘forest’ is a misnomer. Considering the condition of the vegetation and where the fire started, it is unreasonable to suggest that 1,500 acres of additional prescribed burning would have prevented the Station fire from scorching more than 145,000 acres.”

Current estimates from USGS indicate there are approximately 10,000 acres of fuel treatments and more than 160 miles of fuel breaks within the Station Fire perimeter. Many of these areas have been invaded by highly flammable, non-native weeds. Scientists are currently analyzing what impact, if any, these treatments had in modifying the fire’s spread.

Although news reports have continually emphasized that the Station Fire area had not

burned for decades, about half of the area burned was within the average fire rotation period for wildlands in Los Angeles County. “The main reason this fire spread as quickly as it did,” Halsey said, “had more to do with current long term drought conditions and the steep terrain than the age of the vegetation. When conditions are this dry, anything will burn—whether it be grass, shrubs, or trees.”

Earlier this year, researchers Drs. Jon E. Keeley and Paul E. Zedler confirmed the importance of drought in large fires and that large fires have been occurring in Southern California long before we attempted to control them. They have shown that eight extremely large “megafires” (~150,000 acres) have occurred since the 19th century, and all were preceded by unusually long droughts, from 1–4 years. In 1889, the Santiago Canyon Fire burned more than 300,000 acres in San Diego and Orange Counties. This remains the largest wildfire recorded in California history.

Science and firefighter experience have shown that the most effective way to protect lives and structures is through proper community design and fire preparation around homes, not trying to strip the backcountry of native plant communities—which people erroneously call for during wildfires. Trying to clear vast areas of native chaparral will not only destroy valuable public wildlands, but will increase fire danger by replacing iconic, native shrubs like manzanita with highly flammable weeds and destroy vital watersheds that are critical in protecting our region’s water supply and our communities from mudslides.

Rather than blaming land managers, fire agencies, or environmental laws for the fire, we need to take responsibility for our own properties, understand the natural environment in which we live, and value California’s most characteristic ecosystem, the chaparral.

The California Chaparral Institute is a non-profit science and education organization dedicated to promoting an understanding and respect for the chaparral ecosystem and helping communities reconnect with the natural environment. More information about fire and chaparral in Southern California may be found at: www.californiachaparral.org.

Cited References

[Keeley, J.E. and P.H. Zedler. 2009. Large, high-intensity fire events in southern California shrublands: debunking the fine-grain age patch model. Ecological Applications 19: 69-94.](#)

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