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FOREST HEALTH: *MYTHS THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION WOULD HAVE YOU BELIEVE AND THE FACTS*

MYTH: *The goal of the Healthy Forests Initiative is “to improve regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest health.”*

Source: “Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.” *The White House*. August 22, 2002. p. 3.

FACT: “Policy makers and USFS officials have used [the length of time it takes an appeal to be decided] repeatedly as justification for changes in the NEPA appeals process. The Forest Service has argued that ‘administrative appeals and litigation contribute significantly to the time it takes to plan for and decide on fuels projects prior to implementation.’ (‘Factors affecting timely mechanical fuel treatment decisions.’ USDA Forest Service) However, no data have been made available from the Forest Service to indicate just how long these delays are, and it is impossible to answer this question based on the data posted on the agency’s website.”

Source: Cortner, Hanna J., Gretchen M.R. Teich, and Jacqueline Vaughn. “Analyzing the Outcomes of USDA Forest Service Project Appeals: Phase I, the Database.” Draft. Ecological Restoration Institute, Northern Arizona University. Flagstaff, AZ. December 2002. p.55-56.

FACT: Last summer’s forest fires, for example, became an excuse to try to suspend environmental reviews of logging projects...[as part of] the administration’s quiet but lethal efforts to undermine environmental law through administrative rulemaking and judicial negotiation.... The administration’s determined efforts to satisfy its corporate allies at the expense of the environment show no signs of abating.

Source: “Environmental War Clouds.” *New York Times*. Editorial. November 25, 2002.

MYTH: *“Catastrophic wildfires burn at much higher temperatures than normal fires, causing long-lasting and severe environmental damage....Rather than renewing forests, these fires destroy them.”*

Source: “Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.” *The White House*. August 22, 2002. p. 2.

FACT: “Infrequent, but large, severe fires are a normal component of many forests in Colorado, and are *not* an artifact of 20th century fire suppression in all forests.”

Source: “Hayman Fire Case Study Analysis: Executive Summary.” Interim Draft. USDA Forest Service. Rocky Mountain Research Station. p. 10.

FACT: “Because the ecosystems that burned in 2002 have a long history of fire, the native species and populations in this area generally have mechanisms for enduring fire or becoming re-established after fire.”

Source: Ibid. p. 11.

FACT: “...At higher elevations, intense fires at 100- to 200-year intervals perpetuated extensive lodgepole pine forests.”

Source: “Science Update: Fire Risk in East-Side Forests.” USDA Forest Service. Pacific Northwest Research Station. Issue 2, 2002. p. 3.

FACT: What Tom Atzet, US Forest Service ecologist for southwest Oregon, has said about the Biscuit Fire: “If you look at what’s happening this year on the Florence fire and the Biscuit fire, they’re really not out of the range of normal events.” “In the long run it [the Biscuit fire] maintained the well-being of individual species and the forest as a whole” and “It’s important that part of the system burn at high severity.”

Sources: “Adapted to flames, wilderness survives,” *Oregonian*. August 19, 2002 and “Closer look inside wildfire shows that all is not black,” *Associated Press*. September 22, 2002.

MYTH: “Currently, 190 million acres of public land are at increased risk of catastrophic wildfires.”

Source: “Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.” The White House. August 22, 2002. p. 1.

FACT: The “190 million acres at risk of catastrophic wildfire” statistic so often recited by the Forest Service has no basis in any research. The major studies and reports on the national fire situation either directly contradict this number or are silent on the subject: Development of Coarse-Scale Spatial Data for Wildland Fire and Fuel Management (FS), Western National Forests: A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildfire Threats (GAO), Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire Adapted Ecosystems: A Cohesive Strategy (Fire Plan - FS), A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy (Western Governors Association).

FACT: The Forest Service manages 191 million acres and the Bureau of Land Management manages 262 million acres.

Sources: Forest Service Website. <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus/meetfs.shtml>;
Bureau of Land Management. <http://www.blm.gov/nhp/index.htm>

FACT: According to the Forest Service’s most recent research, only slightly under 7 million acres of all undeveloped, non-agricultural land is outside of the historical range of variability for fire risk. Of this, less than 2 million acres are significantly altered from their historical range and this altered state is due to a host of factors such as roads, logging, livestock grazing, and fire suppression.

Source: Schmidt, Kirsten M. et al. “Development of Coarse-Scale Spatial Data for Wildland Fire and Fuel Management.” RMRS-87. USDA Forest Service. Rocky Mountain Research Station. 2002. p. 16.

MYTH: “This [2002] fire season is already one of the worst in modern history.”

Source: “Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.” The White House. August 22, 2002. p. 1.

FACT: 7,184,706 acres of undeveloped, non-agricultural land burned in 2002 while the average annual acreage burned from 1919 – 1999 is over 13 million acres.

Sources: “National Report: Wildland Fires and Acres Burned by State.” National Interagency Fire Center.

http://www.nifc.gov/news/2002_StatsSumm/fires_acres.pdf

“Wildland Fire Statistics.” National Interagency Fire Center. <http://www.nifc.gov/stats/wildlandfirestats.html>

FACT: 8,422,237 acres of undeveloped, non-agricultural land burned in 2000.

Source: “Wildland Fire Statistics.” National Interagency Fire Center. <http://www.nifc.gov/stats/wildlandfirestats.html>

MYTH: “Nearly 83% of firefighters surveyed identified the need for fuels reduction as the top priority for improving their safety.”

Source: “Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.” The White House. August 22, 2002. p. 2.

FACT: Firefighters do not support the Healthy Forests Initiative inasmuch as it pursues curtailment of public participation and regulatory oversight of land management programs. In a letter to President Bush’s administration firefighters stated their opposition to “all attempts to politically justify further environmental degradation in the name of firefighter safety.”

Source: “Firefighters’ Letter to the Bush Administration.” Western Fire Ecology Center. Eugene, OR. August 28, 2002.

FACT: Smokejumper Dr. Patrick Withen: “A logged area is one of the most dangerous areas to fight fires today.”

Source: Walker, Ryan and Arlie Schardt. “Firefighters, Forest Experts, Strongly Criticize Bush Fire Plan.” Environmental Media Services. September 4, 2002.

MYTH: *“Hundreds of communities have been affected by these wildfires. Tens of thousands of people have been evacuated from their homes, and thousands of structures have been destroyed. With more people living near forests and rangelands, it is becoming increasingly difficult to protect people and their homes. Land managers must do more to address the underlying causes of these fires.”*

Source: *“Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities.”* The White House. August 22, 2002. p. 1

FACT: The Forest Service’s Fire Lab **“wildland- urban ignition research indicates that a home’s characteristics and the area immediately surrounding a home within 100 to 200 feet principally determine a home’s ignition potential during a severe wildland fire.”**

Source: Jack Cohen, Research Scientist/Manager, US Forest Service Fire Lab. <http://firelab.org/fbp/fbresearch/wui/home.htm>

FACT: **“The evidence suggests that wildland fuel reduction for reducing home losses may be inefficient and ineffective: inefficient because wildland fuel reduction for several hundred meters or more around homes is greater than necessary for reducing ignition from flames; ineffective because it does not sufficiently reduce firebrand ignitions.”** Treating the home and the immediate 200 feet around it are both necessary and sufficient for the home’s protection. Simple measures such as cleaning out the home’s gutters, raking up dried leaves and grass, and clearing flammable brush can together virtually eliminate the fire risk. But if this treatment immediately around the home is not done, embers from a fire over a mile away could start a fire close to the home even if nearby forests are treated.

Source: Cohen, Jack D. *“Reducing the wildland fire threat to homes:where and how much?”* PSW-GTR-173. USDA Forest Service and General Technical Report. Rocky Mountain Research Station. 1999. p. 192.

MYTH: *“Almost half (48%) of all decisions made in fiscal year [sic] 2001 and 2002 for mechanical treatments of hazardous fuel were appealed.”* **“Conclusion: There are three general reasons it takes substantial time to plan for, make decisions on, and begin implementing Forest Service projects (including fuel hazard reduction projects)...”**

Source: *“Factors Affecting Timely Mechanical Fuel Treatment Decisions.”* USDA Forest Service. July 2002.

FACT: A Freedom of Information Act request revealed that the Forest Service Report that showed that 48% of fuels reduction projects were appealed was put together in a matter of hours and was based upon anecdotal evidence collected over the phone.

Source: Frederick Norbury, Director, Ecosystem Management Coordination, USDA Forest Service. Freedom of Information Act Request by Matthew Koehler of the Native Forest Network.

FACT: In this report the Forest Service used a small and biased data set to draw a broad general conclusion. They used the analysis of those projects that **“tend to be challenged most frequently”** to support an assertion about all hazardous fuels reduction projects. This generalization is unreliable because only 15% of the land treated for hazardous fuels was covered by the data in their analysis. By their own admission the remaining 85% of the area was treated with much less contentious means. If a true test of the Forest Service’s conclusion was conducted, it would find that only a marginal percentage of all hazardous fuels reduction projects were appealed or litigated.

Source: Morton, Jeffery and Laura McCarthy. *“A Comparison of Two Government Reports on Factors Affecting Timely Fuel Treatment Decisions.”* The Forest Trust. Santa Fe, NM. September 4, 2002.