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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Reconsider today's approach to forest restoration

Oct 4, 2020

Today's forest restoration is based on the mistaken idea that historic fires often burned frequently and stayed on the ground ("Forest restoration will prevent disaster here," Letters to the Editor, Sept. 27). In fact, before European settlement, fires burned much less often than generally assumed and occasionally flared up to kill all the trees. For example, the driest forest types in the Santa Fe watershed experienced a fire on average once every forty years, not the once every 5 to 10 years commonly reported.

Restoration efforts are thrown off course by sampling only mature trees that have survived low-intensity fires to generalize about fire histories. Non-random sampling fails to see that the majority of Western landscapes were once made up of younger forests shaped by and adapted to fires of all types.

The smoke from intentionally started fires not only threatens public health during the pandemic but also harms microbial communities that replenish soil nutrients and organic matter and enhance water absorption. Standing dead trees, down logs and native shrubs important to wildlife are also depleted by continuous burning at short intervals. Most significantly, restoration that eliminates 90 percent of the younger trees slows recovery following wildfires and works against forest adaptation to a warmer and dryer world.

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Bad associations