

COMMENTARY

Stand up for New Mexico's wilderness

By Milan Lombardo and Sofia Lussiez 14 hrs ago



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In the next few months, the U.S. Forest Service is planning to cut nearly half the trees in our 107,000-acre watershed. The Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project consists of a mass cutting of 50,566 acres comprising our watershed.

The Forest Service believes this is necessary to prevent possible “future disturbances including wildfire, climate change, and insect outbreaks.” This proposal is based on their approach of preventing such “what if” scenarios — especially forest fire.

But here is the problem: This approach would make almost all future scenarios more dire. This project arises from the Forest Service’s outdated belief that “the forest is simply a source of fuel.” By attempting to prevent the possible “what if” scenarios, the Forest Service is actually increasing the susceptibility of the environment to the very problems they are seeking to prevent.

The “prescribed burns” that follow intensive thinning have a detrimental impact on the environment and humans. Naturally occurring forest fires burn with a greater heat intensity than prescribed burns. These natural fires are hot enough to burn and destroy the carbon particulate that is released into the atmosphere.

On the other hand, prescribed burns release three to four times the amount of carbon particulate, adding to the already exceedingly high carbon dioxide levels in our atmosphere. Natural fires fertilize the soil, allowing for a healthier regrowth stage. Within a decade, post-fire growth absorbs more carbon from the atmosphere than initially emitted.

Commercial thinning can increase the frequency and intensity of forest fires, rather than preventing them. By removing up to 90 percent of trees in a “stand” (a group of uniform trees similar in size and type), forest fires have a greater likelihood to spread faster, in most cases burning a greater percentage of trees. This is because intensive logging diminishes the cooling effects of the tree canopy, resulting in a drier, hotter, more fire-prone environment.

With the Santa Fe Watershed as the main focus of the Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project, it is important to understand the implications that this forest cut may have on the watershed itself. Forested soil is comprised in a small part of organic matter, organic matter is the essential component in soil productivity.

When all the trees are removed from the soil, the organic matter is also removed. When the soil degrades, it loses its physical, chemical, and biological properties. Nutrient free soil can disperse into running or standing water, increasing water turbidity — muggy, cloudy water. Along with increased turbidity, the release of nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen increases eutrophication: excess algae growth, depleting the oxygen in the water.

Whether you agree with findings on the harms of thinning and prescribed burns, we believe that the planned area of this project is unnecessarily large. According to a study conducted by the John Muir Project, thinning is only useful 100 feet or less from homes. Any vegetation management beyond that radius has no additional influence on a home’s or establishment’s ability to survive a wildfire. Instead, it has been proven by many reputable sources that the most effective steps to take in protecting one’s home or establishment is to incorporate fire-safety features on the buildings.

We are high school students who have grown up in this wilderness of New Mexico. The situation at hand regarding the health and longevity of our forest is not an economic or theoretical concern for us. Whether we are hiking, skiing, biking or simply spending time with friends, this wilderness has been and is a sanctuary.

With the potential for catastrophic results, we feel that this is a crucial moment for our fellow New Mexicans to stand up and say that we care for our environment, to say that we don't support the gutting of our forest, the massive unnecessary release of carbon into our atmosphere, erosion of healthy soils and negative impacts on water quality.

As citizens, we must support the positive changes and decisions in our state; likewise, we are also responsible to speak out against the harmful and worrisome decisions that are conceived and acted on. Let's stand up for the health and integrity of our environment.

Milan Lombardo is a senior at the Academy for Technology and the Classics in Santa Fe. He is also the leader of his school's environmental club, Green Team, and he is an intern at the Coalition of Sustainable Communities New Mexico. He is working to make New Mexico a more sustainable and healthy environment. Sophia Lussiez is a recent graduate from Desert Academy and has been a representative for Amnesty International along with working to pass gun legislation in the state of New Mexico.