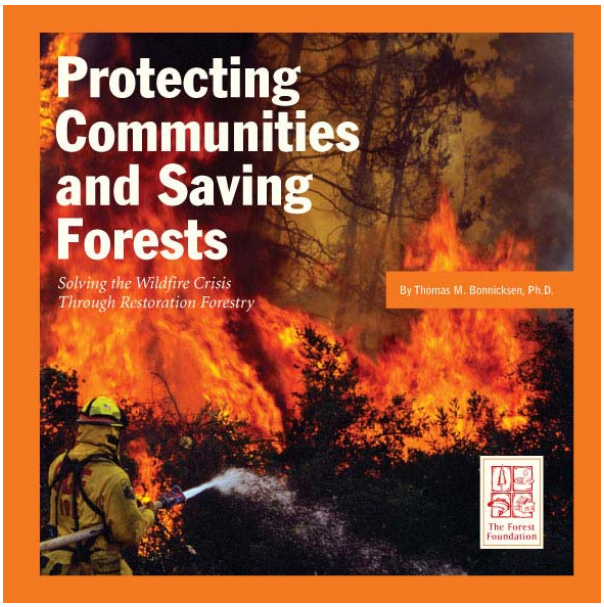
Exploiting the Fear of Fire for Economic Gain

Turning Protected wildlands into tree farms and biofuel

A Review of the Forest Foundation publication, Protecting Communities and Saving Forests

By The California Chaparral Institute



Exploiting fear and stacking the decks with biased information are often used tools by the propagandist to shape public opinion. History is littered with examples. Today, all one has to do is tune into any number of AM talk radio shows to hear much of the same. So when it comes to wildfire, it should be no surprise that those who can use the public's misunderstanding of fire to promote their own view of the world will do so.

With the support of the Forest Foundation, a non-profit group supported by the timber industry, a glossy new booklet is being distributed that purports to be a treatise on how to protect communities and save wildlands from wildfires. However, it doesn't take long for the objective reader to realize that this document is designed to promote the economic interests of the wood products industry.
From the very beginning, *Protecting Communities and Saving Forests* by Thomas M. Bonnicksen lays blame for large wildfires on "unnaturally" dense forests and the endangerment of thousands of lives on fire agencies (through past fire suppression policies), the government (through conservation policies), and an ignorant public (we are disconnected from the land).

To correct these problems, the booklet urges us to imitate what it claims Native Americans did (actively managed forests for thousands of years), significantly increase logging on public lands (trees of all ages should be cut), and "restore" forests that have burned by logging the dead trees and replanting new ones. Nature should not be allowed to take its course. To save the taxpayers from paying for all this, the booklet suggests that we engage the private sector by giving financial incentives to encourage the development of a new "biomass energy" industry, open up currently protected areas to logging, and restrict the public's ability to appeal logging and biomass production plans. The biomass that will fuel this new industry will be masticated chaparral, logging slash, and unwanted trees.

The basic problem with the fire booklet is that it takes what is applicable to a limited number of forests and applies it across the entire state of California. The basic premise appears to be all wildfires are the result of "nature overgrown." Clear out the plants, the mantra goes, and wildfires will no longer be a problem. This is not "modern science" as the booklet claims, but the selective manipulation of the truth.

When forest fires aren't forest fires

The misrepresentation of information is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than when the booklet falsely uses the wind-driven, 2003 wildfires as proof that public forests need to be logged. Here are several examples:

"With an abundance of dead, dry trees in the forests, fires burn hotter than natural. They can easily jump 8-lane highways and blow right through or around fuel breaks. Intensely hot fires create strong winds and can hurl firebrands, or bits of burning trees, up to a mile away."

Yes, a number of forests do have an abundance of dead trees. Federal and state agencies are doing their best to remove these near communities. But dead trees were not involved in the situation described above. Only 5% of the landscape that burned in the 2003 fires involved forests. The vast majority of the areas burned were dominated by shrubland ecosystems, or "brushfields" as the booklet pejoratively refers to them. The "*8-lane highway*" jumps occurred in areas dominated by grass and shrubs. The "*dead, dry trees*" were miles away from such events. The "*strong winds*" that blew embers far ahead of the fire front were the result of Santa Ana wind conditions that originated in the desert, not "*intensely hot fires*."

The *"8-lane highway"* jump occurred on Interstate 8 in San Diego County, far from any *"dead, dry trees in the forests."* Photo taken looking west from the area of Tavern Rd near Harbison Canyon. Source: SD County Sheriff.

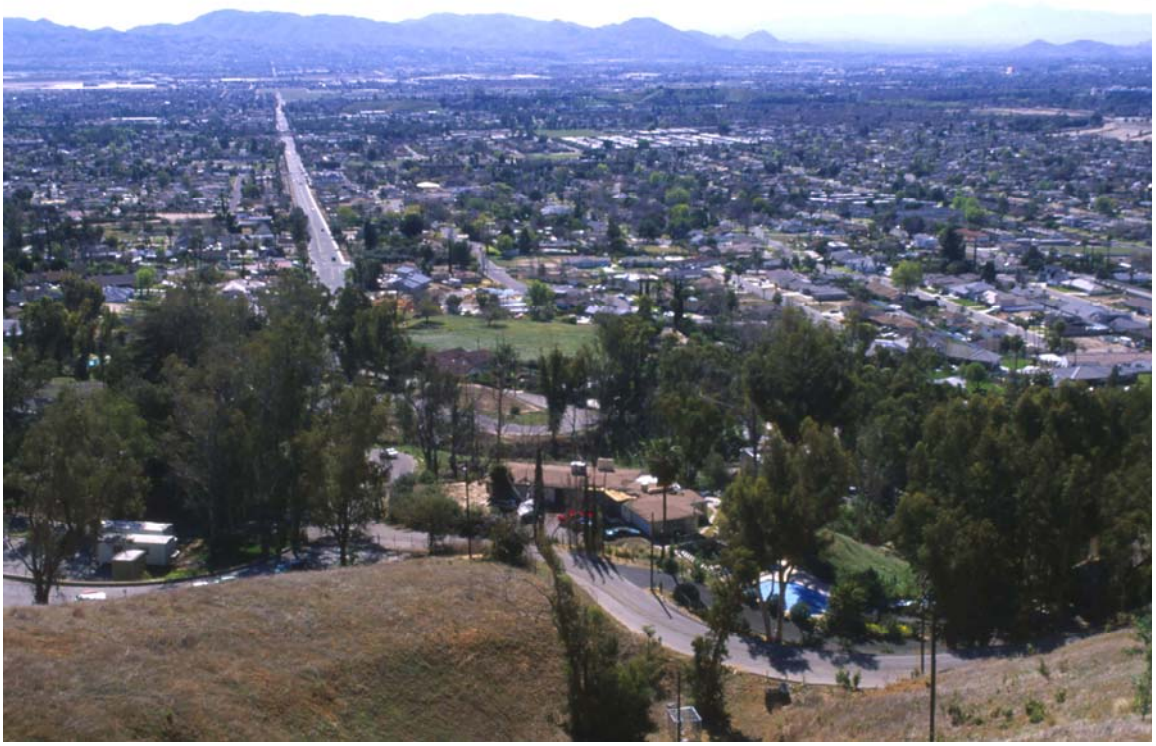
"Living amongst the trees without caring for and thinning the forest has proven to be lethal…In 2003, Southern California wildfires claimed two dozen lives and destroyed some 3,700 homes in a predictable and preventable event."

The vast majority of lives lost and homes destroyed in the 2003 wildfires were within shrubland ecosystems and had nothing to do with "*living amongst the trees*."

"During the 2003 Southern California firestorm, hundreds of homes that were theoretically protected by fuel breaks burned. The Old Fire, for example, simply swept around the east and west ends of Highway 18 that firefighters were using as a fuel break to protect Lake Arrowhead."

Yes, many homes near fuel breaks burned including those near Lake Arrowhead. However, what the booklet fails to explain is that more than half of the homes that burned in the Old Fire were within

suburban communities far from any forests. As it roared down the mountains above San Bernardino, the Old Fire was fueled by weeds and degraded shrublands. As the embers blew into town, homes ignited as ornamental vegetation and exposed flammable surfaces caught fire.



Forests? The 2003 Old fire swept down weed covered foothills (foreground) and burned hundreds of homes along either side of Del Rosa Ave. (left center) in San Bernardino.

Weeds and Palms. Note the condition of the mountains in the background from where the Old fire burned as it moved into the community below. Rather than being forested, it was composed of degraded shrublands and weeds. Also note the black trunks on the three Mexican fan palms in the background. With embers being propelled by strong Santa Ana winds during the Old fire, ornamental vegetation played a significant role in spreading the flames. It appeared most homes ignited from the inside out after embers entered attic vents and other openings (the home in foreground is new).

While there is no doubt that many mountain communities in California are surrounded by hazardous amounts of forest vegetation, it is disingenuous to attribute shrubland wildfires in the southern part of the state to overly dense forests.

Forests *need* us to be natural?

The booklet also claims that forests have been "managed" for at least 12,000 years by humans and therefore must continue to be so. According to the booklet, images of forests as "*dark, mysterious places with huge trees, moss-covered logs under foot and chattering wildlife in tree canopies high overhead – are fleeting glimpses of reality at best.*" Such old-growth forests were "*relatively few and far from permanent*." All forests should be "*open enough to gallop a horse through without hitting a tree*."

One wonders how nature survived without us. Apparently humans are needed to cut down huge trees and make sure shrubs don't keep popping up to prevent the expansion of those dark and mysterious old-growth places.

While there is no data to support the notion that old-growth forests have always been restricted to small patches, there is significant evidence that it was actually commercial exploitation that destroyed vast stretches of the "*pristine forest*" the booklet calls a myth. Ninety-six percent of the original old-growth coast redwoods have been logged. Of the two million acres of original redwood forests that existed when California gained statehood in 1850, less than three percent remain today. Much of the forested landscape in California that is claimed to be overly-dense originally became so because of past logging practices, not fire suppression. Logging, especially clear cutting, opened up or removed forest canopies, allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor and encouraging lush growth.

It is clear that fire suppression has unnaturally excluded fire in some forests, especially those composed primarily of ponderosa pine, leading to overly dense vegetation. However, in other forests such as those along the coast and higher elevation areas of the Sierra Nevada, fire suppression has had minimal impact because natural fire return intervals are so long. In Southern California, fire suppression has actually been essential in protecting chaparral ecosystems from too many fires.

Chaparral

After claiming without references that a "*patchy forest mosaic*" dominated California's lands before European settlement, the booklet turns to chaparral.

While the same strategy can also restore brushlands, re-introducing low-intensity fire can help sustain reasonable fuel loads in brushlands. The goal in brushlands is to establish a mosaic in which half of the vegetation is less than 20 years old.

Chaparral is characterized by a high-intensity, crown-fire regime. Burned moonscapes are a natural condition after a chaparral fire, as they are in some forests such as those dominated by lodgepole pine. The low-intensity surface-fire regime the booklet seems to insist is the only natural way fires burn reveals either the author's

Lodgepole pine forests of Yellowstone. Despite dire warnings that the forests of Yellowstone had been "destroyed" by the 1988 fire, they are recovering beautifully…all by themselves.

bias or a severe misunderstanding of fire ecology. Infrequent, hot, intense fires are exactly what chaparral needs to maintain its ecological health. Details and references on this and why the scientific community has rejected the mosaic hypothesis can be found in the adjoining article in this issue, "Blaming Firefighters for Fires" on page 5.

Furniture is the answer to senior-citizens

In early 2008, the Forest Foundation released another publication that promoted a new angle in their efforts to increase logging: older forests need to be logged in order to reduce global warming. US Forest Service scientists evaluated the paper describing this model (Conard et al. 2008) and found it "greatly inflates the net effect of wildfires", makes "questionable assumptions", and cited references that "do not meet the standard that would be expected from a typical peer-reviewed paper."

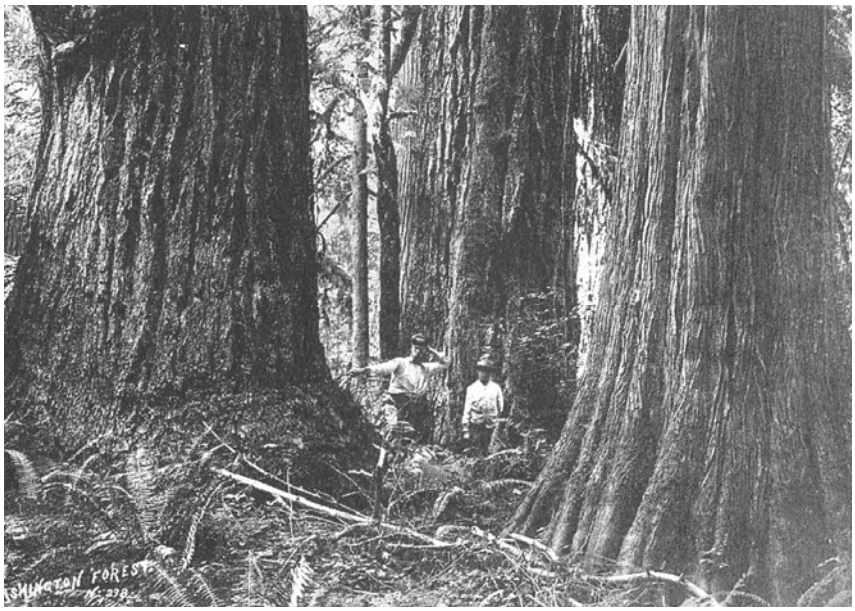
The fire booklet we are reviewing here repeats many of the same patterns. The basic message it offers is that old-growth forests must be logged because *"well managed forests"* absorb and store vast quantities of greenhouse gases. And the wood products produced from such "management" helps to store carbon long-term. After all, *"Furniture from the Elizabethan era still holds the carbon fixed hundreds of years ago."*

While it is generally agreed that the health of some forests can be improved and fire risk reduced by thinning out small trees and shrubs and removing dead trees, the booklet makes clear this is not enough.
"…trees of all ages must be harvested…While densely packed smaller trees may present the greatest fire danger, for instance, removing only young trees would ultimately result in a senior-citizen forest that would present its own challenges. You don't want just old, decaying trees on the landscape; they are not productive, diverse, nor sustainable."

This is the same justification loggers used to destroy most of the remarkable old-growth forests in the Olympic National Forest and National Park. This perspective was even displayed in a USFS educational exhibit at the Forks Ranger Station in the park as recently as 2000:

"A mature stand of timber is largely stagnant. Some liken it to a desert. Decay and death of individual trees diminish what's there. Nothing much happens until management begins."

Below is a photo of what the so-called forests of "*decay and death*" used to look like in the Olympic Peninsula. This is far different from the cherry picked, historical photos showing



A wall of wood up to 300 feet high confronted those who entered the Olympic Peninsula's west side forests. None was saved. Only the inferior fringe forest in the Olympic National Park suggest what it was like. Photo circa 1890. Bert Kellogg Collection.

the "open" forests that were supposed to "dominate" the landscape before Europeans arrived. This photo was taken from Carsten Lien's book, *Olympic Battleground*, an excellent piece of journalism that documents the 100 year struggle to protect Washington State's ancient forests.

Restoration

In an attempt to convince readers that nature can not do it alone, the booklet demands, *"Forests that are destroyed by wildfire must be restored."* It continues by claiming, *"Without reforestation, forestland conversion to brush fields may be permanent or delayed by a century or more."* The restoration process includes logging the burned trees, replanting species that provide quality lumber and *"…returning a few years after planting to remove competing brush so trees grow quickly and are protected against future wildfires."*

Lost in this entire diatribe against anything that can't produce 2x4's is the fact that all those shrubs (brush, brushfields, brushlands, etc.) provide critical habitat for numerous species and are extremely important for post-fire ecosystem restoration. One of the key nitrogen fixing post-fire species is Ceanothus. By removing such plants, the health of the recovering plant community is compromised. However, contrary to the impression it would like to make, ecosystem restoration is NOT what the booklet is proposing. The emphasis is on creating economically viable tree plantations. See Donato 2006 for details on how salvage logging can harm forest recovery.

How do these "restoration" efforts proceed? After removing the trees killed by the fire, herbicides are typically applied to eliminate any germinating "brush" seedlings. Then cyanide is

Herbicide "restoration". The 2002 Star Fire burned about half on the El Dorado and half on the Tahoe National Forests. The former applied herbicide on the fire scar after salvage logging, whereas the Tahoe was prevented from doing so by litigation. The differences are striking. The Tahoe has nitrogen-fixing ceanothus en masse, whereas this stage is totally missing from the herbicide treated El Dorado (left). Since the seed source has been destroyed, this is a major ecosystem loss that will continue in perpetuity. Photo: J.E. Keeley.

used to kill the gophers. After dead trees were logged within the perimeter of a large 1987 fire in the Stanislaus National Forest, areas with less than 30 degree slopes were Roto-tilled (more than 10,300 acres), then herbicides and cyanide was applied to eliminate any pesky competition.

Restoration forestry is NOT about ecological restoration. It's about economics and lumber production. Consequently, since it is not commercially viable to thin skinny trees out of forests in order reduce fire risk, the logging industry has created a rather sophisticated propaganda effort to convince the public the entire forest needs to be managed to save it from itself.

We obviously need lumber, but we also need honest, science-based land management strategies that will allow us to obtain that lumber while protecting natural resources.

Some forests are overgrown due to past fire suppression efforts. However, by ignoring contrary data, misapplying forest management techniques to other ecosystems, and using Orwellian ecology to disguise the legitimate need to make a profit, the Forest Foundation makes the difficult task of protecting lives and property from fire even more so.