

Workshop synthesis paper describes value of prescribed fire in wilderness areas

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South Fork Sun River prescribed fire (2011)—Scapegoat Wilderness, Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, Montana. Photo courtesy of Michael Munoz, District Ranger, Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest. Credit: Michael Munoz, District Ranger, Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest.

Many of the wilderness areas that we treasure were historically shaped by fire. Yet today, many wilderness landscapes are caught in the wildfire paradox—widespread suppression and exclusion of burning over the last century have increased the likelihood of high-intensity fires, which are more damaging rather than restorative.

In December of 2022, experts from land management agencies, Tribes, and organizations across the country convened at the Wilderness and Fire Workshop in Gunnison to consider solutions to this dilemma, including the use of prescribed [fire](#).

Today, The Center for Public Lands at Western Colorado University, in partnership with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, released a synthesis paper titled "Prescribed Fire and U.S. Wilderness Areas: Barriers and Opportunities for Wilderness Fire Management in a Time of Change." The paper presents the discussions of fire and wilderness experts from the Wilderness and Fire Workshop, including the opportunities they identified to help overcome barriers to using prescribed fire in wilderness.

Dr. Jonathan Coop, Western Colorado University Professor of Environment and Sustainability, has spent two decades studying the effects of fire on the landscape and is a principal investigator for this project. He says, "Many wilderness ecosystems were historically shaped by fires ignited by lightning and Indigenous peoples. Deliberately restoring fire in order to avoid the negative outcomes of fuel buildup and [climate change](#) can increase the natural qualities of these places while honoring [human relationships](#) with the land that predated their designation as wilderness."

This synthesis paper incorporates the thinking of wilderness and fire managers, Tribal members, and others with decades of combined experience and research in the field of wilderness management and

prescribed and managed fire.

Evidence shows that the relationship between the land and fire has departed from historical norms because of human actions and a changed climate. The result is increasingly extreme wildfires that threaten a range of wilderness values, forest ecosystems, and society at large.

According to workshop participants, prescribed burns present an opportunity to return balance to the forest ecosystem under more predictable and favorable conditions than those currently accompanying lightning strikes.

Sean Parks, research ecologist and co-author from the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, says, "Prescribed fire may be necessary to restore wilderness ecosystems that are increasingly degraded by over a century of fire exclusion and the unprecedented effects of today's wildfires."

There is strong agreement among experienced land managers that, in a landscape where the gap between current and ideal wilderness conditions is growing, fire should be able to move naturally across the landscape when people or property are not at risk. The synthesis paper also acknowledges challenges. Although prescribed burns aren't prohibited by the Wilderness Act, they are rarely used as a management tool because of disagreement over the impacts fires have on [wilderness](#) values.

Western Colorado University encourages policymakers, land managers, and conservation organizations to consider the paper's findings when making decisions about forest management practices in [wilderness areas](#).

To see the full synthesis paper, please visit www.centerforpubliclands.org/cpl/willdr.

Provided by USDA Forest Service

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