FIRE ZONE: BATTLING CALIFORNIA'S BLAZES

What could have been done differently to slow the spread of the fires?

UNNATI GANDHI
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October 25, 2007

FORESTS

Nobody can deny that gross mismanagement of forests has played a major role in contributing to the extent of the fires raging in Southern California, according to a prominent conservation biologist.

So, while fire is a natural way for the forest to prevent densification, modern practice has been to stop the fires completely to protect homes or harvest the trees. But putting the fires out has disrupted both the structure and composition of the forests, Reese Halter, president of Global Forest Science, said.

"We think of fire as nature's broom that would cleanse the forest floor every 20, 25 years. [Because natural fires have not been allowed to burn], now the forest floor has got dust on it, the dust being the seedlings and the saplings. And the seedlings and saplings that are here are highly volatile, highly combustible."

In Southern California, it's primarily white fir and incense cedar that's burning, resulting in "much more intense, fierce fires that the forest ecosystems aren't used to," he said.

In many cases, the forest as a whole is removed by large wild fires and the trees cannot come back to colonize because the earth has been scorched so severely.

Because much of Western North America has the same dry forest problem, Dr. Halter believes the best possible solution is to mimic the results of having natural fires.

"If we're not going to have fire, then we need to manually get into the forests that are at that urban-wild-land interface and thin them out."

Cost shouldn't be an issue, he said. Prison inmates are already

working on fire lines to put the flames out, and they could be better employed in clearing brush.

"We're talking about changing their chainsaws with brush saws."