

# **Ruidoso News**

## **Opinion**

**Gannett Paper**

### **Drought, fires ahead for much of the West this Summer**

**By Dr Reese Halter/ tree scientist**

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Once again, climate models predict a warm and dry summer for the West. And, in turn, scientists from the Bureau of Land Management fear that will lead to a record fire and wildfire season, surpassing both 2000 and 2002.

Unseasonably high temperatures throughout the Rockies and Coastal Mountains of the West last month melted – and evaporated – vast tracts of the winter snow pack. Instead of predictable slow melt that soaking into the ground and sustaining mountain vegetation, warm temperatures caused the snow to evaporate into thin air. This has scientists alarmed because many reservoirs throughout the West remain depleted.

As the Easter weekend dawned in southwest New Mexico, a late season snowfall fell on the Sacramento Mountains. The pending melt will nourish plants, animals and people.

The federal healthy forest policy has made some significant inroads reducing the fire hazard of drought-stricken Lincoln National Forest. That is, aggressive thinning in fire-suppressed ponderosa pine forests has reduced fuel loads.

Once upon a time, fast surface fires burned about every seven years in these forests. Consequently, there were only about two dozen big old ponderosa pines per acre surrounded by a sea of grasses. Foot thick bark and lack of branches near the ground enabled these trees to tolerate high-frequency surface fires. But over the last 65-years, the birth of Smokey Bear and related fire suppression policies have changed the composition of the forest. Now there are thousands of trees per acre and they react much differently when fire enters the ecosystems. Entire forested systems are consumed by fire and, in fact, fuel bigger fires burning across the dry landscape.

By restoring ponderosa pine forests to their original levels (and leaving the big old trees on the land), monster fires with vast amounts of dried kindling can be reduced. In light of the continued predicted drought, this healthy forest policy seems sensible.

The drought has also created opportunistic conditions for native bark beetles to breed and feed. The water stressed pines are unable to manufacture a gooey pitch, their only defense mechanism against the voracious beetles. Fire suppressions has created not only an enormous food source for the beetles but removed Nature's check to keep the beetle population under control with fire.

In addition, with the climate warming, minus 20-degrees F temperatures in November have not occurred over the past eight years, which would normally kill beetles, and so their populations have been growing exponentially.

An aggressive forest thinning policy in Lincoln National Forest is a successful manipulative tool to combat years of fire suppression exacerbated by drought-like conditions.

The picturesque mountain community of Ruidoso is nestled next to Lincoln National Forest and relies heavily upon tourism as its main industry. It has adopted a forward-thinking approach for its urban forests.

Removing beetle-killed trees and reducing fuel loads, and at the same time maintaining the integrity of the native vegetation, has been a top priority for many years.

Ruidoso's urban forestry policies have been successful, accessing state and federal funding programs to achieve its fire protection goals.

Santa Fe should examine closely the proactive urban forestry model that Ruidoso has implemented for the past decade. The clumps of dead and dying pinon pines that surround Santa Fe are an extreme fire hazard. Those dead pines must be removed from the land before summer thunderstorms, drought and dead trees collide.

Gov Bill Richardson may well be advised to follow the fiscally prudent strategy that Gov Arnold Schwarzenegger is considering adapting to rid 12 million beetle-killed pines along the San Bernardino Mountains. Prison inmates are a cost-effective means to assist in quickly removing

the dead trees from the landscape and obviate the dried dead fuels becoming kindling for yet another monster fire in the summer of 2004.

Santa Fe is a gorgeous historic city, its urban forests must be fire protected from the predicted summer drought.

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