



Research Brief for Resource Managers

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Fairbanks Argues Against “Light Burning” in 1911

Fairbanks, H. W. 1911. Shall we use fire as an aid to forestry? The Overland Monthly 57(3): 304-312.

In the fearful spirit of the day, Fairbanks described light burning as nothing less than “destructive forestry”, killing young trees, destroying the humus and soil, and speeding erosion and water run-off. The ancient open forests resulting from these light burns were deemed undesirable, indicative of too much fire for the sustainable production of merchantable timber and symptomatic of a dying forest. Because there weren’t enough young trees to replace the old ones in these supposedly burned-out forests, it seemed obvious that the unruly burning practices of Indians and early white settlers was “beginning to bear its legitimate fruit”, and the end of forests was near.

To Fairbanks, the 400 mile Sierra Nevada foothill range of California’s chaparral was further proof of mismanagement by light burning. He scoffed, “[chaparral] is the beautiful balance of Nature which our fire-loving friends delight to dwell upon, and to which they urge us to return.” He described chaparral as another kind of fire damaged land, indicative of the struggle by forests to return to forestland and functioning as the nursery for upcoming, valuable timber species. Like the open, mature conifer forests, chaparral’s existence was living proof that the “light burning” practices of Indians and fire advocates were in error.

Management Implications

- According to Fairbanks, open, mature conifer forests and chaparral are unnatural proof that fires are only destructive.
- Fairbanks reasons that fire hinders Forest Service efforts to sustainably and profitably manage forests for timber.

Fairbanks argued eloquently in defense of the U.S. Forest Service’s blanket fire protection policies for conifer forests and chaparral. As common sense alternatives to damaging fire, Fairbanks listed the tools he thought were needed for better fire protection, including more: 1) trails and roads through the forests; 2) trained forest rangers; 3) telephone lines for quicker communication; 4) fire lines; 5) back firing; 6) patrols; 7) laws regulating fire use; 8) and better public education; and 9) cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service.

In short, Fairbanks claimed that chaparral and conifer forests must be protected from fire if they were expected to be forested with trees again. People were supposed to protect them from fire if we wanted healthy watersheds and a sustainable timber harvest, and we needed to do this with trained forestry men rather than the military, which would have been much less ecologically sensitive. Appealing to a sense of responsibility and guilt, he warned us to protect the forests from damaging fires or else future generations would not judge us kindly.