

and furthermore, from the desk of the dean



Dean Jerry G. Schickedanz

Society is in the position of Eve after she bit the apple. We cannot return to Eden.

Can we see the forest for the fire?

There are a lot of angry people in the wake of the worst fire season the West has ever seen. And this fire season is just the latest of a bad lot. In Arizona, environmentalists have borne much of the blame in the minds of public officials and devastated homeowners. An Associated Press story quotes one homeowner who lost his house this way.

"There's a fairly well meaning, but totally ignorant group of people in this community who think you can manage the environment in a hands-off manner, but these people don't live out here. Don't come up here in designer clothes and an SUV and tell me you love the woods. There's no more trees to hug."

In another Associated Press story, a Forest Guardians official pointed the finger back at the homeowners, saying that building in the woods was their mistake.

Loggers and ranchers are quick to point out that the "save the trees/hands-off" mentality is coming home to roost with a vengeance.

Clearly, policies either embraced by or foisted on the U.S. Forest Service and other public agencies have discouraged commercial interests on public lands, and that is what has many people seeing red in retrospect. Mechanical thinning and active human intervention in our forests could have prevented these summer conflagrations, they say.

In a year when firefighters are our biggest heroes, we're told overzealous suppression of forest fires is responsible for fuel-heavy forests.

So, prescribed burns have been the buzz in forest management, since the fury of the Yellowstone National Park fire in 1988. Feelings about this strategy have become conflicted since one of the worst fires in New Mexico history was started by an ill-timed, poorly exe-

cuted prescribed burn at Bandelier National Monument in 2000.

The lessons of 2002 are going to be many and will not likely be universally agreed upon. Our magazine stories show a stew of factors slowly simmered for more than a century, to create our situation.

Scientists know that negative human impact of a century or more ago cannot be wished away through hands-off management, nor will land return to a pre-Columbian state by calling a moratorium on human activity. Society is in the position of Eve after she bit the apple. We cannot return to Eden. We can only cope with past choices. It is necessary to proactively improve the health of our forests.

Public discussion revolves around funding public agencies for active management of forests. This reminds me of the challenge of our public rangelands that also need to be actively managed. There, we have heard calls to remove ranches, ranchers and their cattle. Without permittees, one must ask, who will pay for and conduct the labor-intensive land management chores, such as maintaining the water sources? Will we pay an army of rangers to patrol and work the enormous stretches of range?

Likewise, without commercial interests active in our forests, will the taxpayer be required to foot the total cost of remedying our woodlands? Is such a funding level even feasible? Cooperative management between agencies and commercial interests seems to be more feasible.

It remains to be seen whether the fires of 2002 will serve to clear the clutter in our vision for the future of public lands, or whether we will be unable to see the forest for the fires.