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One View: Fire Fuels Regeneration in Eastern Sierra

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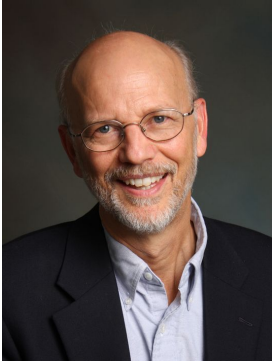
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One View: Fire fuels regeneration in eastern Sierra

Char Miller 1:44 p.m. PDT June 29, 2016



(Photo: Provided to the RGJ)

Sometimes it's the small things that can best tell big stories.

Like the Marina Fire, which currently has burned a modest 800 acres to the north of Lee Vining, threatened but did not burn any structures, and whose greatest disruption has been periodically to shut down US 395. It hardly seems worth much attention.

And such minor fires in the eastern Sierra have received little note. Historian Robert Cermak has dubbed the region, home to the Inyo and Humboldt national forests, an "asbestos" terrain. It's so fireproof that Stephen Pyne, in "[California: A Fire Survey](http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid2596.htm)" (2016) (<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid2596.htm>), pays it no mind.

This disregard, along with the Marina Fire's diminutive size — and lack of headline-grabbing ferocity — is precisely why we should focus on it and the lessons it conveys about the critical role fire can play in the Sierra.



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[Update: Marina fire 100 percent contained](#)

(<http://www.rgj.com/story/news/2016/06/28/firefighters-fear-fire-growth-dry-lightning-marina-fire/86479234/>)

Start with the reality that many of the eastern Sierra habitats which the Marina fire is slowly working through are similar to the more iconic pine forests on the western slope: fire can fuel their regeneration.

This biological process is also one that humans have helped shape. Ethnobotanist M. Kat Anderson argues in "[Tending the Wild](http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520280434)" (<http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520280434>) (2005) that California's First People used fire so routinely and for so long that they created "a carefully tended 'garden' that was a result of thousands of years of selective harvesting, tilling, pruning, burning, sowing, weeding, and transplanting." The vegetation growing on the steep slopes rising above US 395 as it curves between the Sierra and Mono Lake may not be quite as "natural" as we assume.



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[Nevada's dangerous fire conditions prompt restrictions](#)

(<http://www.rgj.com/story/life/outdoors/2016/06/29/nevadas-dangerous-fire-conditions-prompt-restrictions/86513794/>)

That reality is also why the Marina Fire's charring force is not destructive but custodial — a clearing away and a cleaning up. Aspen, one of the eastern Sierra's signature trees, thrives after fire chews through litter and competing species. The pinyon pine may have a fire-return interval of up to hundreds of years, but one way its younger trees can succeed the older is via fire. It can open the canopy, a flame-driven opportunity that makes the whole forest more vigorous.

Animals can be just as opportunistic. The speedy, post-fire resprouting of sagebrush, chaparral and grass is manna to antelope, deer, sheep and other wild grazers that range through the eastern Sierra. Like domesticated livestock, they are drawn to these tasty greens, a biotic rejuvenation and nutritional boon.

These ecological benefits are guiding how firefighters are managing the Marina Fire. They have established control lines on its northern, southern, and eastern margins to protect communities, structures and US 395. Yet they have not suppressed it with fire-retardants and water-drops because however insignificant the Marina Fire may seem, they know its import. They are stewarding it so that it can steward the land.

Char Miller is an environmental analysis professor at Pomona College and an expert on wildland fires and the debates over public-lands management in the American West.

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