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# A Better Way to Restore Wildfire-Burned Forests

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## [A Better Way to Restore Wildfire-Burned Forests \(http://www.kcet.org/news/the\\_back\\_forty/commentary/golden-green/-arson-ignited-and-wind-whipped-the.html\)](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/golden-green/-arson-ignited-and-wind-whipped-the.html)

by [Char Miller](#)

on February 19, 2014 3:50 PM



The Old Fire burning above the city of Highland in October 2003. | Photo: [matt-artz](#) (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/matt-artz/9645538185/>)/Flickr/[Creative Commons License \(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/\)](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)

Arson-ignited and wind-whipped, the Old, Grand Prix, and Padua wildfires that blew up in October 2003 were among the many conflagrations erupting across Southern California that month. Collectively, the dozen or so infernos became known as the Fire Siege -- the most expansive, deadly, and costly in the region's modern history.

Although it were not the largest -- the Cedar, which consumed 273,246 acres and killed 14 people, claims that unhappy title -- during its two week run, the Old/Grand Prix/Padua complex was dangerous enough. Individually ignited, these blazes ultimately merged into a single firestorm, roaring through canyon and foothill, upslope and down; they burned more than 161,000 acres of chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and oak savannah and torched more than 1,100 homes and

structures. Six people lost their lives and an untold number of wildlife perished.

Like thick snowflakes, ash fell across a broad swath of communities hugging the San Gabriels, from San Dimas and Claremont to Etiwanda and Fontana, and all those nestled up against the San Bernardino range out east to Highland, a nearly 40-mile front of cinder, soot, and smoke.

A decade later these fires remain alive in human memory and in the charred terrain, marks sensitive and visible, grief-stricken and recovering. Healing is a slow, maybe always a partial process.

Hoping to nurture the land's restoration, in early February, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced a new initiative dubbed the [Chiefs' Joint Landscape Restoration Partnership \(http://www.heraldbulletin.com/breakingnews/x1280777320/US-government-to-spend-30M-on-forest-restoration\)](http://www.heraldbulletin.com/breakingnews/x1280777320/US-government-to-spend-30M-on-forest-restoration). At its helm will be the U.S. Forest Service and the [Natural Resources Conservation Service \(http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/\)](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/), and this partnership, funded to the tune of \$30 million, will launch an initial 13 projects in 12 states. The goal is to aid communities like those situated around the San Bernardino National Forest to build more defensible space, while also regenerating wildlife habitat and protecting key watersheds.

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Although the promised fiscal resources expended per site are relatively small and will be spread over several years, the objective is large: to seed restoration work across property lines, private and public.

This landscape-scale orientation is experimental and necessary. Fires and floods respect no human-demarcated boundaries, but management strategies have always adhered tightly to survey markers, whether individual or corporate, local, state, or federal. This has led to some unfortunate results in terms of diminished forest health and resiliency, increased risks to water quality, and an impoverishing of the civic dialog about how to manage and maintain the nation's forested estate.

Breaking down those rigid barriers, seeing landscapes and water flows as systems that require systemic attention, and stimulating multi-owner conversations about the links between a changing climate, spikes in disease, pests and invasives, and continued land fragmentation as a result of development within fire zones, are among the outcomes that this federal funding will support.

Robert Bonnie, Agriculture Undersecretary for Natural Resources and the Environment, speaking in Helena, MT at the kick-off ceremonies, underscored the collaborative nature of the program. Noting that the gripping drought, warmer climes, beetle outbreaks, and much longer fire season require a broadening of the scope and scale of restoration projects across the west, he declared that if "we only worked on our national forests, it wouldn't be enough to address this problem."

That's why in Helena, Bonnie praised the collaboration between the agency, the city, and its water system to proactively create defensible space within the watershed that provides most of Helena's drinking water.

This gambit is a direct response to the 2002 Hayman Fire's damage to the forests surrounding and the post-fire sediment flows into the reservoirs the [Denver Water Board \(http://www.denverwater.org/supplyplanning/watersupply/partnershipuSFS/\)](http://www.denverwater.org/supplyplanning/watersupply/partnershipuSFS/) manages for its Mile High City consumers. The massive clogging of the city's water works sparked a then-innovative agreement between the local water purveyor and the Forest Service to better protect upland riparian corridors and well-wooded slopes. Helena is benefiting from Colorado's experience, and hopes to make more fire-safe its woodland watersheds through a Joint Partnership investment of \$865,000.

Receiving more than three times that amount is the San Bernardino National Forest. If you hike the trails weaving

through it, you'll understand why this tinder-dry region has been targeted with nearly three million dollars; woody debris snaps beneath your boots and the Jeffrey Pine look emaciated; dead trees standing.

A lack of precipitation, along with climate-disrupted weather patterns and bark-beetle infestations, has done serious damage to the elevated forest's health. The fires that roared through these rugged mountains in 2003, and those that have burned since then, fueled by high winds and ample fuel, have put the communities like Big Bear and Arrowhead on high alert.

Those living in cabins leased from the Forest Service have been in particular danger: they are responsible for clearing away brush, debris, and overhanging branches but by law the agency is prohibited from underwriting those important safety measures.

That's where the [National Resource Conservation Service \(http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/\)](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/site/national/home/) comes in: because it only works with private land owners, it is able to fund the creation of defensible space around these cabins and other sites within the projected 15,000 acres targeted by this round of funding. "Practices like this can help forests be more resistant to drought, [said Jason Weller \(http://www.pe.com/local-news/local-news-headlines/20140205-national-forest-local-wildfire-prevention-gets-3-million-boost.ece\)](http://www.pe.com/local-news/local-news-headlines/20140205-national-forest-local-wildfire-prevention-gets-3-million-boost.ece), NRCS chief, while inspecting the area around Big Bear Lake; and that "helps them resist disease and wildfire."

Yet whether the allocated funds will buy sufficient resistance is open to question; are the agencies really able to treat 15,000 acres on the SBNF at a mere \$200 per? That's seems a low-ball price for intense labor in steep, oft-thickly tangled forests.

What is not in doubt is the Obama administration's commitment to cultivate as many partners as possible in making for more resilient communities, reaching out to tribal, local, and state entities. Even if this collaborative agenda is the most significant legacy of this Joint Partnership, it will have generated much-needed good will, and in so doing may also help ease some of the searing memories of the 2003 Fire Siege.



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## About the Author

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