

The Sensible Environmentalist

Fighting Fire With Reasoning

(NAPS)—**DEAR DR. MOORE:**
Why does each year seem to bring more devastating forest fires?



Dr. Moore

Each fire season isn't progressively worse—last year almost four million acres burned compared to nearly seven million acres in 2002—but we're definitely seeing a larger number of more devastating fires than there were in the past. Ironically, one reason for this is the fact that we suppress fires to protect human lives and property.

Throughout history, fire has contributed to the health of forest ecosystems by burning underbrush and smaller trees and leaving large trees mostly intact. Today, forests are surrounded by communities, so we suppress fire as much as possible. Unfortunately, this creates an unnatural build-up of what can best be described as fuel for fires that are much, much worse.

These are the fires that in 2003 killed 28 American firefighters and destroyed nearly 6,800 homes and other structures. They burn hotter and longer, killing countless animals, polluting the air and water and leaving the earth effectively sterilized.

There is a solution, however. Many forests are overly dense and

therefore prone to catastrophic fire. By actively managing these forests—removing dead wood and thinning undergrowth, for example—we can reduce this threat.

A good example is the Cone fire, which burned 2,000 acres of California's Lassen National Forest in September 2002. Of the total area burned, 1,600 acres were part of the Blacks Mountain Experimental Forest, which had been given to the U.S. Forest Service in 1934 for ecological study. The Cone fire raged intensely for days, engulfing everything in its path, until it was stopped dead by a research plot in the Blacks Mountain Forest. The plot had been thinned through selective logging and burned in a controlled way to clear the underbrush. The result was an open forest that not only stopped the fire, but looked the same as it did 500 years ago when regular fires swept through the high, dry country.

As a sensible environmentalist, I believe that active management and, specifically, the kind of selective forestry that stopped the Cone fire, should be used to prevent catastrophic wildfires across the U.S.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com.