



Caring for the Land and Serving People

How Does this Affect Forest Health?

From “Confronting the Wildfire Crisis” FS-1187a, January 2022. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.



A forest hit by the 2021 Caldor Fire near South Lake Tahoe, CA. USDA Forest Service photo by Cecilio Ricardo. From “Confronting the Wildfire Crisis” FS-1187a, January 2022. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Fire exclusion degrades such fire-adapted forests by upsetting balances in the natural system. Fuel buildups, coupled with climate change, can then alter the way a fire will behave when it inevitably returns. In overgrown ponderosa pine, for example, rather than culling vegetation close to the ground and restoring balance to the natural system, the fire can kill most vegetation and permanently alter the ecosystem. In a way, fuel buildups are a sign of forest sickness, and a high-intensity wildfire—instead of cycling needed fire through the system—can kill it.

This is the new wildfire reality facing much of the West: it is nothing less than a forest health crisis. A healthy forest is resilient—capable of self-renewal following drought, wildfire, beetle outbreaks, and other forest stresses and disturbances—much as a healthy person stands a good chance of recovering from a disease or injury. Fire-adapted forests actually require frequent low-intensity wildland fire to stay healthy by keeping the number of trees and other plants in balance with scarce resources such as water, much as your own health depends on balances within your own body. Western fire-adapted forests at the lower elevations where most people live include ponderosa pine and mixed-conifer forests of pines, Douglas-fir, western larch, and grand fir.

In the process, a high-intensity wildfire can also threaten human lives and destroy entire communities. By using existing tools like community wildfire protection plans and creating defensible spaces, people can help forested landscapes stay healthy and resilient. Through the prudent acceptance and use of the right kind of wildland fire in the right places at the right scale, communities in the WUI will support fire-adapted forests across the landscapes they share. Without major changes in the way people choose to live with wildland fire in the West, the devastation of the 2020 fire year—with more national forest land burned than in any year since 1910, including 1 million acres in a single day—will become the new norm.

Making Headway Against the 7th Worst Weed in the World

Eradicate one of the top ten worst weeds in the world? Impossible most would say. But put this task in the hands of the Georgia Forestry Commission and they will work to make it happen.

Like a business after a major shopping holiday, the state of Georgia's cogongrass program is finally profiting from all of their hard work. For the first time since the Forest Service Southern Region's Forest Health Protection Program began funding cogongrass control in 2004 for the state of Georgia, there are more dead cogongrass spots in the state than new areas of cogongrass being reported. This is a significant shift in the status of cogongrass for the state of Georgia and provides an opportunity to highlight a successful invasive plant treatment program. The Georgia Forestry Commission's Cogongrass Taskforce treats every cogongrass infestation that is reported in the state, and re-sprays as needed until they are negative for cogongrass for three years and receive 'eradicated' status. As budgets have dwindled over the years, the continued funding of the cogongrass initiative as well as the hard work and dedication of Georgia Forestry Commission staff have given hope to the notion of eradicating a weed that has consumed millions of dollars in control efforts throughout many Southern Gulf states.

Cogongrass (*Imperata cylindrica*), accidentally introduced as packaging material and later planted for erosion control and forage trials, quickly escaped cultivation and spread throughout the South and is now a federally listed noxious weed. A unique grass that is even a pest in its home range, cogongrass forms thick monotypic stands, crowding out native species and destroying native habitat. Of the many issues cogongrass causes in an ecosystem, perhaps the most perilous are the extremely hot and intense fires that occur when it burns—sometimes producing

flame heights over 10 feet tall that destroy mature trees and put wildland firefighters at risk.

It is no wonder cogongrass is a priority species of control in many states and has received continuous control funding through the USDA's Forest Service Forest Health Protection Program. As Georgia and many other states continue to fight the war against cogongrass, it is important to recognize these program successes and continue the funding for long-term management of invasives.

To learn more about cogongrass and the Southern states' efforts to eradicate it, please visit: www.cogongrass.org.



Cogongrass infesting a pine plantation. Photo by Charles T. Bryson USDA Ag. Research Service, Bugwood.org #1299003.



Cogongrass burns extremely hot during prescribed fires. Photo by David J. Moorhead, Univ. of GA. Bugwood.org #5078025