



2021
SAF
NATIONAL
CONVENTION
NOVEMBER 3-6
VIRTUAL

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The Big Blowback

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How Does an SAF Working Group Operate Virtually?

For SAF members that remember attending annual conventions when they were in person, you might recall the annual Working Group (WG) meet ups, Working Groups

FIRE

The Big Blowback

By Stephen Pyne

Megafires can soak up media the way their smoke does sky. The proximate causes behind them are well documented, and most observers regard the outbreaks as blowback from a century of poor forest management, climate change, feckless urban sprawl, and fire exclusion. But underwriting them all is the transition to a fossil fuel society. Megafires are a pathology of developed or trying-to-develop nations.

Megafires aren't new. From 1870 to 1920, America experienced a wave of monster fires an order of magnitude larger and more lethal than those of recent decades. This year commemorates the 150th anniversary of the first of the memorialized, the fires that burned Peshtigo, Wisconsin and Chicago on the same day.

What powered those fires was fuel: the immense swaths of slash left by logging and land clearing from Maine to Washington, and cities built of reconstituted forests. Underwriting the project was the advent of steam in the form of railroads that connected forests to markets, brought in settlers, and cast sparks with abandon.

State-sponsored conservation emerged in response. The modern era of fire protection dates from the Big Blowup of 1910 that rampaged over the Northern Rockies and traumatized a fledgling USDA Forest Service. The country spent the next 50 years trying to take fire out of its landscapes.

By the 1960s, the project seemed complete and its consequences apparent. Particularly in landscapes that had known frequent fire, fuels flourished, firefights became more costly, and critics questioned the logic of removing a natural process from sites dedicated to preserving natural conditions. In 1968, the National Park Service promulgated a new policy that sought to restore fire to something like pre-settlement regimes; the Forest Service followed in 1978.

The country has spent the past 50 years trying to reinstate good fire. With mixed results. Where a fire culture flourished, as in

The Great Fire of 1910



The Great Fire of 1910 by Molly Quinn. Credit USDA Forest Service.

Florida, prescribed fire became a foundational strategy. Where backcountry abounded, experiments led to reinstating natural fire or loose-herding wildfires. But the 1970s through the mid-1980s were the last time when conditions were mostly favorable. Since then, with special vehemence in the West, fuels have continued to stack up, invasive grasses have spread, exurbs have propagated like fireweed, and politics has polarized into dysfunction. What began as global warming is morphing into a full-gamut mutation

of Earth's climate, with the wet spells getting wetter, the dry getting drier, and the hot getting hotter which drain fuels and stiffen winds and help leverage barely controllable fires into full-bore blowouts. We've been unable, at any reasonable scale, to catch up.

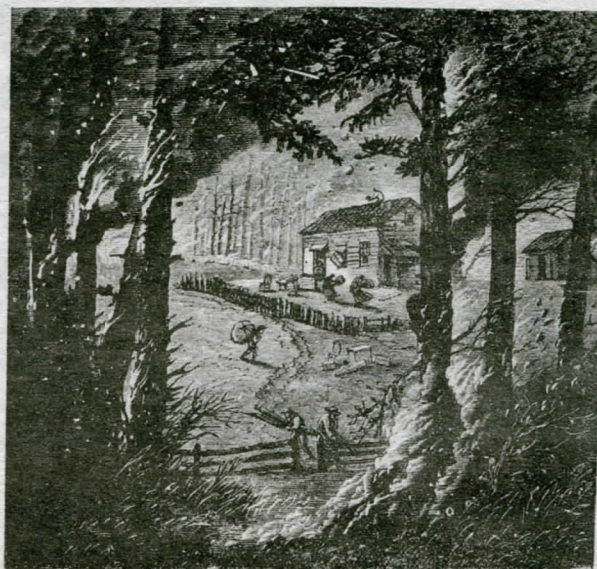
Messed up landscapes, with climate change as a performance enhancer, have led to messed up fires. Megafires are back, often as serial conflagrations year after year. The consequences of a past century of misguided practices have arrived. What places don't suffer flames must cope with smoke palls roiling like the dust blizzards of the Dirty Thirties. The Big Blowback is upon us.

These are not new observations. The fire community in the places most affected recognizes that the urban fire service model doesn't work in the backcountry, that we are not putting fires out, we're mostly putting them off. The causes behind the Big Blowback – climate change, land use, feckless recolonization of rural scenes – are revisited over and over until the words and white papers have polished the data into clichés. We don't need more studies.

The national cohesive strategy for wildland fire offers a usable framework for a response. Make our communities more fire adapted. Make our landscapes more fire resilient. Upgrade our capacity to act. Update those goals to address climate change. Which of these tasks matters most? All of them. We need to do them all together, with the understanding that each will have a different timeline to completion.

There is no reason for towns to burn. We solved this problem a century ago and watching fires rip into Gatlinburg and through Paradise is like watching polio return. Exurbs need the same fire protection standards that took conflagrations out of America's cities. Much of the needed reforms, like upgrading our creaky electric grid, we need to do anyway. We could address the worst sites in a handful of years, if we chose.

Land management outside of towns will be harder. But we know the basics. We



A WISCONSIN HOUSE ENVELOPED IN FLAMES.

(Left) Artist's rendering of Peshtigo Fire approaching a Wisconsin farm. Credit: Forest History Society, Durham, NC. **(Right)** 1910 fires commemorated 100 years later. Credit USDA Forest.



can leave some fires to nature. We can do the burning ourselves. We can tweak and rearrange the living landscape to better promote the fires we want and retard those we don't. And we can try to remove fire, which can make sense in a few targeted places. We could accomplish most of this in a few decades.

Climate change is tougher still, though unless abated it will eventually overwhelm our other mitigation measures. But climate change is only one phase of a larger transformation wrought by our exploitation of lithic landscapes, that is, once-living, now-lithified biomass that we have converted to energy, funneled into a menagerie of machines, and transformed into plastics and petrochemicals. Its reach is everywhere. It shapes how we live on the land. It even makes possible the kind of fire suppression we attempt. Add up all that combustion and we are creating the fire-informed equivalent of an ice age.

In ancient times, observers spoke of a second nature that humans had made from the first nature of living landscapes. People passed between two fires, those of nature and those they set. Today, we live in a third nature underwritten by lithic landscapes, and we find ourselves between three fires,

a three-body problem for which there is no exact solution.

The Big Blowup traumatized a young institution into doubling-down, with ultimately unhappy consequences. Probably the simultaneous breakout of the light-burning controversy, which challenged progressive thinking on fire, discouraged any hint of compromise. The Big Blowback is affecting mature institutions, which have the lessons of 1910 as part of their heritage. Instead of simply ordering more airtankers and engines, we have a chance to step back and craft appropriate mixes of fire preventing, lighting, and fighting, of tinkering with living landscapes, and of managing rather than simply disrupting climate.

We can do this. We are the Earth's fire monopolist: fire is what we do that no other creature can. What we have done we can undo, though we should expect plenty of unanticipated outcomes. We should meet our fire future with hope as well as fear. **FS**

Steve Pyne is a writer, urban farmer, former North Rim Longshot, and emeritus professor at Arizona State University. His most recent book is The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next.