SECTION III

Smoke Reports: Covering Underreported Issues

The typical "boilerplate" fire story focuses on how big the wildfire is, how much damage it is causing, how many people are fighting the fire, and which local communities are threatened by the fire's potential spread. These angles are sometimes supplemented by human-interest stories, such as the personal tragedies of people who have lost their homes to wildfire, or firefighters who were injured or killed. These story frames are quick, easy and safe for reporters to apply.

But there are many other aspects to wildfire events and fire management issues that do not get the coverage they deserve. These underreported issues may be less dramatic than daily "battle reports," but they involve important, newsworthy information about the systemic sources of and potential solutions to wildfire "catastrophes" and the wildfire "crisis."

In some cases, covering these necessary issues may only require an alternative perspective, using a different frame, language or set of questions to cover the same events or issues. In other cases, it will require some investigative reporting to discover suppressed information and alternative sources, requiring more investment by journalists to get the whole story.

Risks to Firefighter Safety

Each and every single fire suppression incident involves a certain degree of health hazards and safety risks for wildland firefighters. According to statistics compiled by the National Interagency Fire Center, there have been 945 firefighter fatalities since 1910. The largest cause of fatal accidents is being burned over by the wildfire, but a significant and growing percentage of fatalities are related to aircraft and motor vehicle crashes, and health-related events such as heart attacks. Beyond actual fatalities, there are scores of injuries and illnesses among firefighters that are recorded by fire officials, but are never reported in the press.

Many of these injuries are minor: Bee stings, poison oak rash, blisters, bruises, cuts and abrasions and head colds usually don't make newsworthy items. But there is occasionally the drama of helicopter evacuations from remote firelines when some firefighter goes into anaphylactic shock from a bee sting, or when firefighters are sent to hospitals after their eyes swell shut from poison oak rash, or when illnesses like bronchitis afflict dozens of people in smoke-inundated fire camps.

These non-fatal diseases and injuries are hardly ever reported. There is also the ever-present health issue of fireline accidents—called "near misses" by firefighters—that are often caused by the cumulative effects of sleep deprivation and smoke inhalation along with the inherent hazards of fighting fire. There are also the added risks of specific suppression tactics or strategies, such as aggressive direct attack in flashy fuel types or intensive mop-up on steep, rocky slopes deep within burned-over snag patches. There are long-term health risks related to inhalation of wood smoke, whose symptoms may not appear for decades later among long-term firefighters and fuels crew members.

These relatively frequent firefighter illnesses and injuries, as well as the occasional fatality, are not only of human interest, but can reveal more systematic problems occurring within the fire bureaucracy, as well as the very nature of the tasks of fire management. Firefighter safety is the number one priority for all fire management actions, but firefighting is inherently hazardous duty,

and seasonal firefighters get no health care benefits besides workmen's compensation. It would be a valuable lesson for the public to learn via news media accounts that there is "collateral damage" in the form of health hazards and human casualties involved in making "warfare" on wildfire.

Taxpayer Costs of Fighting Fire

Reporters are usually good about reporting on a specific fire's total cumulative costs-to-date of suppression operations. But these days of record-breaking multi-billion dollar federal budget deficits, such figures are having reduced impact on public consciousness. Rarely do reporters break down the total suppression costs of a given wildfire incident, and provide analysis of where the bulk of taxpayer funds are going.

First, there is the issue of rising costs and budget deficits for suppression expenditures. This issue is, in fact, gaining news coverage, especially the Forest Service's practice of "borrowing" funds from other programs in order to pay for budget deficits in the suppression program.

Stories have reported the apparent absurdity of taking money from fire prevention and fuels reduction programs in order to pay for fire suppression. But **just like the Pentagon during times of war, the Forest Service is the only other federal bureaucracy that can engage in deficit spending to fight wildfires**, and critics have charged that there is a lack of fiscal constraint or accountability in suppression spending.

In fact, Incident Commanders have few incentives for reducing taxpayer costs, and face no penalties for making costly decisions. As internal Forest Service reports reveal, there is a widespread "spare no expense, blank check" attitude among fire commanders:

> *"The Forest Service manages emergency firefighting funds as if they are unbudgeted, unlimited, unallocated and without benchmarks on acceptable spending levels. This environment provides the appearance of no accountability."* [source: USDA-Forest Service. 2000. An Agency Strategy for Fire Management: Report from the National Management Review Team. Washington, D.C. January 12]

Enterprising reporters will likely discover a significant amount of waste and theft occurring inside fire camps. Resources are often "hoarded," meaning more dozers, for example, are ordered from fire dispatch centers than may be needed at the moment. And occasionally there are some firefighters who will try to take some tool or piece of equipment home with them from an incident's fire cache.

But investigative reporters may discover more questionable expenses and taxpayer losses because of the exorbitant rates the federal government pays to private contractors for crews, equipment, goods and services. The growing privatization of federal firefighting operations, and the increasing monopolization of firefighting companies, is significantly accelerating under the second Bush Administration, but this issue has escaped most journalists' attention.

There are a number of important economic issues to cover: The high payments for contractors, the growing political involvement of lobbying organizations representing the private firefighting industry, the lack of accountability and restraint in government purchasing decisions. In some cases, the government pays far greater amounts to lease equipment from contractors than they would if they simply purchased the items outright. FUSEE firefighters argue that waste and abuse of taxpayers'

resources is fundamentally an ethical issue that adversely affects firefighter safety, and begs for the watchdog role of the media.

Finally, while reporting on suppression costs and examining some of the economic issues of suppression, journalists should translate total or daily cost figures into more comprehensible terms for the average reader. These would include calculations of the dollars-per-minute, per-hour or per-firefighter that the federal agencies pay private contractors to lease helicopters, heavy equipment and motor vehicles or to purchase various goods and services such as meals and showers.

Broken down into more comprehensible figures, **the economic costs of suppression operations will likely appear alarming, if not *scandalous,*** to some readers, and will provide a valuable alternative perspective for great articles addressing the economic aspects of fire management.

Environmental Impacts of Firefighting

Contrary to notions that firefighting "protects" natural resources from "destruction," fighting fires causes its own set of environmental impacts that in some cases can be more significant and long-lasting than the effects of wildfire alone. [source: Backer, D.M.; Jensen, S.E.; and G.R. McPherson. 2004. Impacts of Fire-Suppression Activities on Natural Communities. Conservation Biology 18(4): 937-946]

Some of the adverse environmental impacts from aggressive wildfire suppression include: Soil compaction and erosion and stream sedimentation from firelines and especially dozerlines; water pollution from fire retardants; old-growth logging from "hazard" tree removal; high-severity burning from backfires and burnouts, just to name a few. For a comprehensive primer on firefighting actions and their environmental impacts, see the report, "Collateral Damage: The Environmental Effects of Firefighting," archived at: http://www.fire-ecology.org/research/biscuit_suppression.html.

However, unlike every other major ground-disturbing land management activity—such as logging, road-building, grazing or mining—firefighting stands alone as a programmed activity that agencies do not subject to federal environmental protection or public disclosure laws. **The federal government has *never* systematically examined or scientifically analyzed the environmental impacts of firefighting**. This is a huge void that needs to be covered by the press.

Firefighting damages are not too difficult to discover; reporters just need to know who and what to ask, and where to look. In Section IV of this *Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire*, a list of questions is offered to help journalists get at this information from government spokespersons. But the real people to ask and places to look are firefighters on the frontlines. Again, it has been argued that journalists are tightly controlled by government agencies and largely excluded from speaking to firefighters on the firelines, but members of the press are going to have to demand this kind of access in order to get this type of story.

Many federal bureaucrats and elected officials have the opinion that the majority of people do not care about environmental damages caused by firefighting—people just want wildfires put out no matter what. Similar to actual combat operations, there will be strong proponents of a kind of "patriotism" that espouses "my government, right or wrong."

But the more the public learns via news stories about fire ecology and how many forest ecosystems are adapted to, depend upon or benefit from fire and the more the public learns about the short-term damages and long-term negative impacts of firefighting, the more a critical perspective on the costs and impacts of suppression will become an accepted and important angle for fire reporting. FUSEE firefighters believe the press should inform the public about this serious albeit suppressed environmental issue that represents institutional, political and policy choices.

Benefits of Prescribed Burning and Wildland Fire Use

Fire professionals are keenly aware of a double-standard in fire management: Whereas high-intensity backfires can be ignited during suppression incidents, causing extensive damage to natural resources, these firing operations will not be challenged or criticized by news media. Low-intensity prescribed burning operations, on the other hand, will either go unreported (except for stories about local residents complaining about smoke emissions), or if a prescribed burn escapes control and becomes a wildfire, then the responsible agency or crew will get "crucified" in the press. This famously occurred during the 2000 Cerro Grande fire in New Mexico despite the fact that it was a suppression backfire—not the original prescribed fire—that burned into Los Alamos and destroyed more than 200 homes. Thus, the double-standard works such that fire professionals believe if you ignite a severe backfire that burns uncontrollably the press will celebrate you as a hero, but if you ignite a prescribed fire that "slops over" the fireline the press will castigate you as a villain. [sources: http://www.fire-ecology.org/citizen/cerro_grande_myths.html. See also: http://www.fseee.org/forestmag/losalamosreport.shtml]

Wildland Fire Use (WFU), formerly called "prescribed natural fires," are lightning-caused fires mostly in designated wilderness areas that are not actively suppressed. Instead, these fires are allowed to burn for ecological and resource benefits. These WFU incidents always require a plan, an incident management team and firefighters to monitor and manage the fire, and this can entail significant numbers of personnel and resources.

Wildland Fire Use incidents are *managed* wildland fires; regardless, the press often erroneously labels these fire management operations as "let burn." The implication is that these are unfettered wildfires burning out of control and unattended. The fact is that vastly more acres of forestland need to be burned than agencies have the resources or ability to ignite. Natural ignitions provide opportunities to reintroduce beneficial fires into ecosystems at reduced costs than management-ignited prescribed burns. WFU provides a means for avoiding the safety risks, economic costs and environmental impacts of aggressive fire suppression.

Wildland Fire Use operations do not generate the same kind of media coverage as suppression incidents, probably because they tend to occur in more remote wildlands that do not threaten private homes or communities. It is also possible that they do not attract reporter's attention because managing wildland fires does not fit the same dramatic "combat" frame as fighting wildfires.

But, it is a vital necessity for the public to understand and eventually accept a greater role of natural and prescribed fire in forest ecosystems. Expanded WFU opportunities are going to be a principal means of reintroducing fires, especially into remote natural areas.

If reporters choose to cover WFU incidents, they may be surprised to discover many of the same tools, equipment and tactics conducted on suppression operations, only these would be used to "put

fires *in*" instead of "put fires out." Accordingly, WFU stories can be written in dramatic, heroic, action-filled terms, too.

At a minimum, though, journalists need to end the double standard in fire reporting: Their uncritical if not unquestioningly positive coverage of suppression operations no matter how costly or destructive; contrasted to their skeptical, alarmist, negative coverage of WFU and prescribed burning operations (if there is any coverage of these operations at all).

Role of Climate Change in Large Wildfires

Another underreported issue that seems to be gaining more credence as a potential angle for writing is the role of climate change or "global warming" in the growing frequency of large-scale severe wildfires. Scientific evidence is accumulating that global warming is causing changes in weather and vegetation patterns that is more conducive to rapid fire spread and high fire intensity. For the best synopsis of the best available science on the role of global warming in current wildfire dynamics, see the San Diego Declaration on Climate Change and Fire Management. [http://www.fusee.org/content_pages/docs/San%20Diego%20Declaration.pdf]

Whole regions of the country are experiencing prolonged drought, higher temperatures and more storm activity (especially dry lightning), and these trends in changes in weather conditions are highly correlated with large wildfire events since the late 1980s. Most climate researchers warn that we have just begun to see the rise in temperatures, changes in precipitation patterns, shifts in vegetation cover and increasing frequency of extreme weather events that are in store in the future as a result of global warming. Add to this list the increasing frequency of large-scale, high-severity wildfires resulting from these changes in climate. Consequently, the energy and climate policies of the current Administration and Congress deserve some critical media scrutiny and coverage in reporting on wildfire events.

Influence of Past Commercial Logging and Livestock Grazing on Wildfire

In the debates over the Bush Administration's "Healthy Forests Initiative" and subsequent "Healthy Forests Restoration Act" of 2003, news media largely failed to take the environmental community's criticisms of commercial logging seriously. These were not simply ideologically-based charges against future logging in theory, but science-based critiques with historical and empirical data on the legacy of commercial logging and livestock grazing and their effects on current wildfire events.

Journalists did not have to rely solely on the words of environmentalists, but could have easily witnessed for themselves the relationship between logging and wildfire. This opportunity is still available to the media to pursue. It is a relatively easy operation for journalists to fly over recent burned areas and observe the patterns of fire severity.

In general, the most severely-burned areas of the fire tend to be located within roaded and logged areas. Journalists can clearly see for themselves that clearcuts and young timber plantations tend to be uniformly and severely burned from wildfires. These distinct cutover patches are easily distinguished from adjacent uncut areas, and reveal that **burned clearcuts are the closest things to the proverbial "*moonscape*" scene of a treeless, lifeless, scorched Earth**.

As well, journalists can see the effects of burned logged areas on adjacent unlogged stands. Young timber plantations tend to cause higher mortality effects on adjacent old-growth stands. However, outside the fragmented general forest with its isolated "islands" of old-growth stands amidst a virtual sea of plantations, unroaded and unlogged areas tend to exhibit more of a diverse or mosaic pattern of fire effects, with old-growth stands showing less uniform severity or mortality.

Given the effects of past logging on current wildfires, how will future logging have different effects on future wildfires? Journalists do not need to approach that question purely as a matter of faith or theoretical conjecture, as logging proponents would have them do, but can look to the recent past as a guide to the future. Accordingly, in reporting on future wildfire events, journalists should directly address this issue, and question the glowing, optimistic and unfounded claims that increased logging will decrease wildfire size and severity.

In sum, the above items represent underreported issues that are ripe for journalists to take some initiative and investigate. Reporting these issues will distinguish more these reporters from the rest of the pack, better inform the public about systemic policy or institutional problems, alert citizens about potential solutions and expose possible non-solutions.