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FUSEE

Spotfire!

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## Burning Resentment in Northern California

As wildfire season in northern California fast approaches, residents in Trinity County are still angry about the way the 2008 wildfires were managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Residents claim that extensive burnout and backfire operations were responsible for nearly half the burned acreage, and unnecessarily prolonged the blazes that choked the area with dense smoke for nearly three months. A local organization called "Concerned Citizens for Responsible Fire Management" have sprung up to lead the charge against backburning. Composed of retired wildland firefighters, they claim that the agency refused to "put the fires out" and instead intentionally set fires to private lands.



Local [newspapers](#) like the *Redding Record-Seachlight* and the *Trinity Journal* have been publishing feature-length articles about the controversy. It is likely that should another spate of wildfires ignite in northern California this summer, journalists will be asking hard questions about firing operations, and will be getting many critical comments from wary local residents.

FUSEE has also been critical in recent years about the scale and severity of backburn operations across the West. While our organization is loud and proud about promoting fire use on as much acreage as feasible (after all, we do call ourselves FUSEE with good reason!), the precise location, timing, method, and scale of firing operations should be determined by firefighter safety, community protection, and ecological restoration objectives that are preferably well-planned before any ignition (wildfire or backfire) occurs. Too often, fire managers stop with the first objective-firefighter safety and crude "contain and control" objectives and completely ignore community and ecology objectives. Consequently, some backburn operations may contain wildfires with minimum risk to firefighters, but they may be completely counterproductive to the goal of fire management: proper stewardship of natural resources and native ecosystems.

FUSEE made a big splash at the Pacific Coast Fire Conference in San Diego last December with our oral presentation on the effects of suppression firing operations on the size and severity of wildfires. In fact, of all the multitude of research projects and papers that have attempted to determine which of all the many environmental variables associated with weather, terrain, or fuels have the most influence on fire behavior, it is bizarre that there is almost no peer-reviewed published research on the role of the human hand (a.k.a. backfires and burnouts) in fire behavior and fire effects.

The fact that the Forest Service does not collect or analyze any data on its backburn operations is alarming, and makes the agency vulnerable to rumor-mongering such as may be occurring in northern California, and does not allow for any "lessons learned" as it relates to ecological restoration goals. At a minimum, all firing operations should be carefully mapped and monitored, and data properly recorded for later analysis. Unlike the smoke of summer wildfires, this "burning issue" of fire management is going to blow over, and the controversy will likely grow unless - and until - the fire management community can demonstrate to the public

we serve that fire-lighting at the right time, place, and conditions is the safest, most ethical and ecologically appropriate way to manage wildland fires.

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Your [membership](#) dues and financial [donations](#) support FUSEE's public education and policy advocacy work to improve the environmental and working conditions of fire management workers and the citizens they serve.

FUSEE supports a growing network of progressive fire professionals who envision a new fire management paradigm that interconnects firefighter safety with professional ethics and ecological restoration.



We strive to provide a safe forum and a collective voice for public and private sector fire management professionals to educate the public, policymakers, and the press about the challenges facing fire management today.

If you would like more information about FUSEE, don't hesitate to [contact us](#) or visit our [website](#). We look forward to hearing from you.

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