

Walk through Woods shows need for more thinning, deliberate fires

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ALPINE - Meadows blackened by the Wallow Fire are now a deep green and dotted with patches of yellow and purple flowers after a few weeks of rain.

Most of the forest roads have reopened, the fish are biting in the lakes and the tourists are gradually returning to the eastern edge of the White Mountains.

On the ridges and peaks, mile after mile of blackened conifer testify to the ferocity of the Wallow Fire.

Jim Pitts, silviculturist for the U.S. Forest Service ranger districts in Alpine and Springerville, looks at the devastation and sees the need for more forest-thinning and deliberate fires in the Apache National Forest.

This fire will provide a safety buffer for the unburned portions of forest and for White Mountain communities for maybe seven years, Pitts said.

After that, the forest will sprout new, burnable growth and the forest floor will be littered with "heavy fuels" - the fallen hulks of this year's devastation.

The thinning that saved Alpine and Greer was sufficient only with the added ingredient of "an all-out war" waged by firefighters, he said.

Walk through the woods above Alpine, and you can see where the edge of the treatment area absorbed the energy of the wall of fire advancing toward the town.

Fire dropped from the tree tops here, where the pines have room between them, but was still burning very hot. The first trees are blackened sticks, giving way to browned foliage and finally to a mix of brown and green needles.

The half-mile-wide donut around Alpine, where all the small trees were removed and the ground beneath them cleared, bought time and added a level of security for firefighters, but more needs to be done, he said.

Pitts is more impressed with the effectiveness of a wider thinned area around Nutrioso, up to four miles into the surrounding forest. There, firefighters did not have the safety zone of the wide meadow in Alpine and had to withdraw. Yet, few homes were lost and much of the forest is intact.

Judy Palmer, fuels specialist for the Apache and Sitgreaves National Forests, said the work of the White Mountain Stewardship Project, which has thinned 50,000 acres so far, continues for another two to three years, even in the wake of the big burn.

The Apache-Sitgreaves is also joining with three others - the Kaibab, Coconino and Tonto - on the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, an ambitious plan to "treat" up to 50,000 acres a year for the next two decades.

Both projects are community-wide efforts that provide contracts to private mill operators and forest-product manufacturers for selective timber harvesting.

Pitts said Arizona's mountain communities should have buffers deep enough that fires can be steered around them easily, without evacuations.

That would also allow fire managers to more easily plan prescription burns or allow unplanned fires to burn when they are beneficial, he said. A lot of small fires are preferable to one big one.

Fires, even catastrophic ones, are a natural part of the forest's life cycle, Pitts said.

"There has got to be some element of change. Without that, you never have new life."