



Smoke particles create a rosy sunset over Priest Lake and the Selkirk Mountains in northern Idaho.

## THE ULTIMATE FIREFIGHT

### *Changing Hearts and Minds*

Andy Kerr

Public attitudes toward wildfire are wildly at odds with the best available science. The challenge for the conservation movement is to move the public away from seeing forests and fire through the eyes of Bambi to viewing them through the lenses of science and economics. This means taking on the fire-industrial complex, which is very content to fleece the taxpayer while destroying forests in the name of saving them.

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Conservationists have to kill Smokey Bear. While certainly not a short-term winning public relations strategy, there may be no other way in the long term to actually save and restore forests. Yes, offing Smokey Bear would be like ordering a hit on Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy. Although all these icons are primarily the domain of children, Smokey Bear is different from them in two important respects.

First, at some point in their lives, most people stop believing in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy—but nearly all American adults still believe in Smokey Bear.

Second, only Smokey preaches a message that, when heeded by others, actually causes harm to the forest. (We shall leave aside concerns about juvenile icons that encourage excessive material consumption, imply that rabbits lay eggs, or condone the selling of human body parts.) Smokey advocates certain policies that damage forests, waste tax dollars, and actually make people less safe.

Smokey's indoctrination has been incredibly effective—98 percent of Americans can finish the sentence that begins: "Only you . . ." Smokey is a creation of the Ad Council, an entity that seeks to do good for good causes by marshaling advertising industry talent to use their skills—at least once in a while—for a higher purpose than selling unnecessary and/or poorly made crap that wreaks havoc on our individual and collective waistlines, pocket-books, and/or self-esteem.

Smokey should go back to school and update his message. It's happened before. Smokey's original 1944 message was that all fires in the forest were bad ("Only you can prevent *forest* fires"). In 2001, Smokey changed his tune, then stating that there are both good and bad fires ("Only you can prevent *wildfires*").<sup>1</sup>

Smokey Bear may again be changing his tune. When turning 60 in 2004, he said, "I don't promote the suppression of wildfires or prescribed fires . . . my message is to help prevent *careless* wildfires! Prescribed fires can be beneficial to plants and animals and prevent wildfires if they are done under *supervised*

conditions!” (emphasis original).<sup>2</sup> Is Smokey now in favor of *not* suppressing wildfires? Is Mr. Bear okay with *careful* wildfires? This doesn’t make any sense to me either (as 60 is quite old for a bear, perhaps he’s losing his mind). A fire in the wild started by nature, or by an unauthorized human, is now deemed a “bad” fire, while a fire set in the wild by a duly authorized human is a “good” fire. It’s a start.

Advertising theory says that to sell a product, service, or concept, it’s best to appeal to the customer’s beliefs (“what people think the world is like”) and values (“guiding principles of what is moral, desirable or just”).<sup>3</sup> Conservationists have learned to appeal to people’s belief that excessive exploitation and pollution are bad for humans and the environment and that conservation and stewardship are valuable to protect the land, air, water, and wildlife for this and future generations.

Such marketing strategies are effective for conservation when the public’s beliefs and values coincide with those of sound science and good conservation policy. It’s simply a matter of motivating the public to act in some way to further its own beliefs and values. However, in the case of wildfire, the beliefs and values of the conservation community (not to mention the overwhelming scientific evidence and the professional opinion of the academic community)<sup>4</sup> are deeply—and at this point, almost totally—at odds with those of the public.

The public generally fears all fire, and generally this is a rational fear. In the wrong place, fire is very bad. We don’t want our buildings to burn, especially not with people in them. However, most of the public fail to distinguish between the generally built-up environment (“frontcountry”), where humans can and should control fire, and the generally natural environment (“backcountry”), where humans cannot and should not.

Wildfire is not “prevented,” but merely delayed—often incurring later and greater fiscal and ecological costs. More importantly, wildfire is generally beneficial to the forest. Most forests of the American West coevolved with fire. Wildfire sustains and renews these forests.<sup>5</sup>

The behemoth fire-industrial complex profits directly from current firefighting policies. Keeping the public in the dark about the benefits of wildfire rewards this mutual back-scratching collaboration of government bureaucrats, private contractors, timber corporations, and elected officials.

Blissfully ignorant, the overwhelming majority of the public has been misled on the issue of backcountry (wildlands) fire. This vast majority now believes that backcountry fires can and should be fought just as those in the frontcountry (urban, suburban, and rural) areas.

As conservationists, we have no choice but to directly confront the public and challenge its values and beliefs about fighting backcountry fires. However, as a rule, people don’t like it when their beliefs and values are questioned.

The tried-and-true method of promoting just causes—“speak truth to power”—is not applicable. Rather than confronting the powerful before the masses, this is a case of needing to challenge the masses directly.

Conservationists must take steps to move the public’s beliefs about wildlands fire to be in line with the scientific understanding of wildlands fire. While com-

prehensive strategy and tactics for each step are not discussed here, techniques and methods that immediately come to mind include litigation, protest, theater, legislation, regulation, ridicule, and education.

### 1. Change the Public’s Time Frame and Viewpoint

In 1987, the editor of a local daily newspaper was on the brink of editorializing that much of a nearby national forest in southwest Oregon should be made a national park. He had learned of the extraordinary biodiversity, the pristine watersheds, and the beauty of the area. Then a portion of it burned, as forests have been doing throughout the ages in the Klamath-Siskiyou ecoregion. After the fire, the editor changed his mind. In his view, since the forest had burned, the area was no longer national-park quality. A year later, much of Yellowstone National Park burned. However, this editor never wrote an editorial calling for the park’s abolishment.

While a burned forest is not pretty, wildfire is either the birth of the next forest or the continuation of the present one. Before nature reveals her healing powers and rebirth, a burned landscape offends our aesthetics of what a forest should look like. The public needs to think beyond today’s video clip of a singed forest and understand that both the forest that was and the forest that will be are dependent on fire. If more of the public saw the rebirth of the Yellowstone forests that burned in 1988, they would better understand this phenomenon.

### 2. Expose the Fire-Industrial Complex

The fire-industrial complex must be exposed for the racket it appears to be—an annual raid on the public treasury for enriching private interests, furthering bureaucratic careers, aiding reelections, and providing a feedstock of public timber for private gain. The fire-industrial complex is a “racket” in almost every sense of the word:

**racket** *n* 1: confused clattering noise: CLAMOR. 2a: social whirl or excitement. b: the strain of exciting or trying experiences. 3a: a fraudulent scheme, enterprise, or activity. b: a usually illegitimate enterprise made workable by bribery or intimidation. c: an easy and lucrative means of livelihood. d: slang: OCCUPATION, BUSINESS.<sup>6</sup>

Staggering sums of money are spent in mostly futile attempts to extinguish wildfires. Taxpayers are being fleeced by an iron quadrangle of government bureaucrats, private contractors, timber corporations, and elected officials.

Government bureaucrats rely on private contractors and timber corporations to lobby elected officials to give the bureaucrats money, much of which is passed through to contractors to supposedly prevent timber from burning, so it can be logged more profitably later by the corporations. This is all done in the name of and under the cover of the public’s genuine—though ignorant and misplaced—concern about forests and fire.

Every player in the fire-industrial complex pulls its weight. If it is a slow wildfire season, sometimes someone—usually in the contracting corps, sometimes in the bureaucracy—may well start fires to get the money flowing. Frontcountry firefighters are paid full time whether something is burning or not. Backcountry firefighters and/or fire companies are not paid as much, or at all, unless there is a fire to be fought.

### 3. Hold Fire Bureaucrats Accountable

The public needs to understand that the paramilitary effort in generally futile attempts to put out wildfires can cause more environmental harm than is purportedly caused by a wildfire left to burn. Fish-killing fire-retardant chemicals in streams, eroding bulldozed fire lines, felled (and later logged) trees, backburns, and burnouts are far more destructive than natural wildfires, and often result in hotter fires.<sup>7</sup>

Elected officials give government agencies a blank check when it comes to paying bureaucrats and private contractors to fight wildfire. The limitation on spending during fire season is not set by any sort of budget, but by the simple fact that there are no more people or equipment available to be contracted at any price.

### 4. Empower Pyrophiles

Since the early 1970s, scientists at Oregon State University have urged Forest Service officials to burn the grass balds of Marys Peak on the Siuslaw National Forest. For almost as long, the Forest Service has said that it has plans to do just that. Historically, this highest point in the Oregon Coast Range has not been covered with forest, primarily because of Native American and lightning-caused burning. Besides the cultural and aesthetic reasons to keep the balds, they are also great wildflower habitat. Today, still unchallenged by fire, the noble fir trees continue their ignoble march upon the meadow.

There is probably not a more risk-free management burn than on Marys Peak. The risk of a fire burning out of control is almost nil. The bald is the highest point in the Coast Range and fire usually travels uphill. The surrounding forest is noble fir—not Douglas-fir—an indicator of seasonal snow pack and adequate residual moisture. The Siuslaw National Forest is a rainforest. Northwest Oregon has the lowest incidence of lightning strikes in the lower 48 states. Natural forest in the Oregon Coast Range thus burns only during the most severe dry and windy weather. Such extreme weather conditions are very rare and easy to plan for and manage around.

Yet, in over three decades, no Forest Service official has had the courage to drop the match, even if the first storm after the annual summer drought is predicted in the next 24 hours. Bureaucratic incentives—both positive and negative—need to be changed so professional managers are encouraged to restore natural wildfire to natural ecosystems.

### 5. Reclassify Most Bad Fires as Good Fires

In the late 1990s, a lightning-caused wildfire erupted in the Hells Canyon Wilderness on the Idaho-Oregon border. The terrain is hellacious, and the sparse timber in the area is off-limits to logging. The management plan said that naturally caused fire in the Hells Canyon Wilderness would be allowed to burn, and indeed the wildfire was left alone to ebb and flow with the day and night and whims of the weather and available fuel. It was a nice, healthy, and necessary fire.

However, the wildfire eventually crossed the line from a “good” fire to a “bad” fire. The line was the Hells Canyon Wilderness boundary. The fire moved from protected “Wilderness” to unprotected wilderness. These wildlands adjacent to the designated Wilderness were just as natural, roadless, and wild (and had

as few commercially valuable trees). And though these lands were in a national recreation area, the management prescription in case of wildfire was full and immediate “suppression.” As soon as the wildfire crossed the good-bad boundary, the Forest Service fired up its firefighting machine and spent several million dollars over just a few days to try to put out the now-unauthorized fire. The fearless firefighters only abandoned their Herculean expenditure after they awoke one August morning to snow. No problem. There would be another wildfire soon enough to go play with, while the taxpayers pay.

### 6. Distinguish Between Good and Bad Firefighters

A good firefighter fights bad fires; a bad firefighter fights good fires. Fires in the frontcountry are generally bad; fires in the backcountry are generally good. A firefighter who goes into burning buildings to try to save people is a good and heroic firefighter. A firefighter who goes into the burning backcountry to try to stop nature—or risks his or her life trying to save someone’s inappropriately placed third home—is a bad and foolish firefighter.

In this post-9/11 era, when we are tragically short of heroes as it is, frontcountry firefighters are true heroes who don’t get paid anywhere near enough for what society asks of them. Their compensation comes more from helping others and occasionally basking in the public gratitude that episodically befalls them after performing a particularly selfless (and usually very dangerous, and sometimes tragic) act.

Backcountry firefighters receive misplaced gratitude, if not adulation. During the 2002 Biscuit Fire on the Siskiyou National Forest in Oregon, handmade and heartfelt signs of appreciation sprouted in the nearby town of Cave Junction for the battalions of firefighters who encamped there for several weeks.

In the case of the Biscuit Fire and many other fires, the hottest and most dangerous burns were those set by the firefighters themselves as backburns and burnouts. These officially sanctioned burns were far more threatening to the town than the naturally burning Biscuit Fire—yet even those backburns were not much of a threat.

Nonetheless, the thick smoke that hung over the town, along with residents being able to see some glowing embers at night and all those firefighters hanging around, meant that most townsfolk were indeed truly scared, even if they had little reason to be.

Eventually, as other fires (actually, even better money) called, the Biscuit Fire settled into an uneasy truce with firefighters (it was extinguished only after the fall rains came).

(N.B.: To this day, most of the homes in and around Cave Junction are not fire-safe. Too many still have flammable roofs and flammable vegetation adjacent to them. At this writing [August 2005], even the Forest Service ranger station fails the guidelines for defensible space around buildings, as posted on its own bulletin board.)

### 7. Challenge the Media Coverage

While some national media have critically reexamined their reporting of western wildfires, most regional and local media have not.

How many news reports have you heard that say, “The fire has ‘destroyed’ X thousand acres”? Even at ground zero, an acre is still an acre; it is not destroyed. What they probably meant to say is that “X thousands of acres of forest have been destroyed.” However, that’s not true either. The forest was changed, altered, and renewed—not destroyed. Many news reports speak of “charred” forest, when “singed” is more accurate.

Ironically, many news organizations correctly report that it is weather—not human effort—that finally quashes wildfires. There are countless quotes from the fire boss on scene that state in effect, “We had the fire contained, but then the weather changed,” or “We now have the fire controlled, thanks to some help from the weather.” Weather ignites most wildfires, and weather extinguishes most wildfires.

Wildfire media coverage may be divided into three categories: before, during, and after the fire. The best reporting is always after a fire has gone out. The worst reporting is during the fire, while the reporting before a wildfire flares up is mixed.

Fire-industrial-complex public relations flacks keep busy in the off-season. Before the fire, the stories they push are generally of two genera: protecting homes from wildfire or ominous predictions of a coming terrible wildfire season.

The home-protection stories focus on efforts to help wildland-urban interface homeowners take prudent and effective measures to prevent their homes from burning when a wildfire does come.

The coming-terrible-wildfire-season stories are worse. Without exception, the story line is that the next wildfire season could possibly be the worst on record. If the spring was dry, then the fire-industrial-complex mouthpiece forecasts “horribly dry tinderbox conditions” for the coming summer and fall. If it was a notably wet spring, then the public relations line is that the wet weather has “caused so much plant growth that, when it dries out, it will provide more fuel for destructive wildfires!” In any case, the fire-industrial complex—taxpayers willing—is always ready to milk the challenge.

Media coverage during a wildfire is—with very few exceptions—appalling. There are multiple reasons for this.

First, most reporters are generalists—particularly on television, where most people get their news—who don’t know much about nature and wildfire, and so they must rely on what they are fed by the fire-industrial-complex public relations flacks. In the course of a week’s work, the same reporter might do stories on a wildfire, a house fire, a car wreck, a football game, a city council meeting, a robbery, and the circus coming to town.

Second, wildfire areas are tightly controlled. Reporters are herded by flacks to see only what the fire propaganda machine wants them to see, and are told only what the fire-industrial complex wants them to hear.

Third, television images are selected for the most impact. A typical cool-burning fire on the forest floor won’t make CNN. Only atypical hot-burning “crown” fires make it on the news. (Crown fires do occur, but on comparably little acreage.) Dispatching an expensive satellite uplink truck to the scene must be justified with compelling footage.

Fourth, viewers—especially the 98 percent that are Smokey Bear’s faithful—want both to see drama and to hear good news. They love viewing people and machines marshaled to fight a wildfire and save homes. If asked, they would say that wildlands firefighting is one of the few things they don’t mind paying taxes for.

The coverage after a wildfire is almost uniformly good. The follow-up pieces are not done as “breaking” news and are therefore more thoughtful and better researched. They often focus on the magnificent healing powers of nature. Reporters who specialize in science, the environment, or natural resources usually do these stories. They tend to be print stories, not television.

### 8. Show the Futility and Cost of Fighting Backcountry Fires

The public must be made to realize that the environmental impacts on air, water, and soil from firefighting can exceed those from the wildfire itself. That the long-term upsides of wildfire outweigh any short-term downsides. That most of the fires that the fire-industrial complex claims to have extinguished would have gone out anyway. That after a wildfire reaches critical mass, it is weather that dictates the course of the fire, not human intervention. That the huge sums spent trying to put out what are in fact beneficial fires at the height of the wildfire season would be better spent: (1) helping people fire-safe buildings; (2) preventing fires in the frontcountry, where most people live; and (3) starting (prescribed) fires in the backcountry the rest of the year to restore natural fire regimes and healthy forests.

### 9. Show the Utility of Making All Buildings Fire-Safe

The wildland-urban interface (WUI, or “*HOO-ee*”) is where the frontcountry and backcountry collide. Fireproofing WUI structures can reasonably ensure that they will not ignite from nearby fire.<sup>8</sup> It would be much more efficient for the government to require nonflammable roofing material and vegetation management within a few hundred feet of a house or other building than trying to fight WUI fires. Indeed, it would be much cheaper for taxpayers to pay the full cost of fireproofing private property than the cost of our present wildfire strategy. Buildings can and should be defended against wildfire; forests cannot and should not be.

### 10. Promote a New Icon for Juveniles of All Ages

The creation of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, Reddy Squirrel teaches children (and adults) that the best—and most responsible—way to protect buildings against wildfire is to create and maintain a defensible space around them, and to use flame-resistant construction. Reddy is cute and lovable and wears a hard hat and work boots (but no pants).<sup>9</sup>

### 11. Transfer Responsibility from the Public Sector to the Private Sector

The contrast between fire regulations in the frontcountry and the backcountry is remarkable. Building codes in cities are full of provisions to prevent structures from burning, or, if they do, from burning others. Firewalls are required between buildings, fire doors for stairwells, fire-resistant building materials, and so on. It is illegal in most jurisdictions to have unmowed fields in summer within city limits. Eccentrics are prevented from filling their homes with old newspapers lest a fire start. Commercial buildings have sprinklers and other

fire prevention or fire control devices. Private homes are built to code and must have smoke detectors. Fewer regulations exist for WUI buildings.

In the frontcountry, one’s taxes pay for the cost of fire prevention and fire control. In the wildland-urban interface, few fire districts exist. WUI building owners may pay a small fee to a state forestry agency for fire protection, but it nowhere approaches the costs of fire protection. Other taxpayers pick up the remainder of the cost.

Few insurance policies distinguish between highly regulated frontcountry buildings and essentially unregulated buildings in the WUI (or even the backcountry, where no buildings should be); most charge all policyholders the same. Thus most insurance holders end up subsidizing the few that live in the woods. Other kinds of insurance routinely distinguish between good and bad drivers and give discounts to nonsmokers. Most homeowner’s insurance makes those who live in flood zones and “tornado alleys” and hurricane country pay more (or have more “Act of God” exclusions), but for some reason the same logic is not applied to people who build in the path of fire.

### 12. Stop the Cycle of Build and Burn and Build and Burn and Build and . . .

A major role of government is to prevent people from doing stupid things, especially things that also have the potential to harm others. Government sometimes limits people’s ability to build in floodplains. It requires life jackets on all watercraft. Building in the path of wildfire is no different than building an unsafe building.

In an example of supply-side ecology, in 1982 President Ronald Reagan signed into law the Coastal Barriers Resources System (CBRS). The law prohibits the expenditure of federal funds in specified low-lying undeveloped areas on the East and Gulf Coasts that are often ravaged by hurricanes. In units of the CBRS, no federal funds are available for highways, sewer systems, flood insurance, disaster relief, and other programs that encourage people to build in harm’s way. The federal government does not prevent a local government or private landowner from developing or building anything in a CBRS unit; it just removes the possibility of federal bailouts after the inevitable disaster. It has worked very well.

In another example, after rebuilding entire towns multiple times following Mississippi River floods, the federal government has paid to move entire towns out of the floodplain.

It is time for a policy that puts WUI building owners on notice that government will no longer bail them out during and after the next fire. Such a policy would put WUI building owners on their own. They can assume the risk themselves, they can pay to fire-safe their structures, they can create fire districts and tax themselves for their own fire protection, or they can do nothing. That is the American way.

### 13. Starve the Beast

The timber industry has long benefited by not having forests burn, so they could be logged at their leisure. However, public attitudes—especially about public forests—have changed. The public no longer views public forests as

fountains of timber, but rather as refugia of biodiversity, sources of cold clean water, recreation spots, and scenic vistas. In this case, the public’s values and beliefs are correct.

The timber industry has discovered that their best and last hope to continue logging public forests is to convince the public that the only way to save its cherished forests from wildfire is to log them. Increasingly, the timber industry is making its moves on the public’s trees after every wildfire. Postwildfire logging cannot be ecologically justified.<sup>10</sup> “Salvage logging” after a wildfire is done only for economic reasons, and—even more than with regular timber sales—the taxpayers subsidize it. Salvage logging does nothing to help replace, restore, or recover a burned forest. Ecologically, logging after a forest fire is akin to mugging a burn victim.

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So, what is the conservation movement to do when the masses are so wrong? As Thoreau noted in “Civil Disobedience,” “Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors, constitutes a majority of one already.”<sup>11</sup>

There have been times in this nation when the vast majority of the public has been wrong on issues. At the time, of course, those in the majority had no clue they were wrong, because nearly everyone around them felt the same way. However, even overwhelming majorities can be changed over time. Thoreau opposed slavery at a time when a majority of Americans favored the practice, or at least did not oppose it (politically, the effect is identical).

Conservationists are not going to convert the public on the wildfire issue by being stealthy, clever, or patient, or by using the perfect sound bite. Merely having better spokespeople (scientists, enlightened firefighters, etc.) will not bring about the necessary changes, and appealing to the public’s existing beliefs and values won’t conserve forests either. Only by confronting the public—and forcing it to first reexamine and then change its collective beliefs and values—can people coexist with forests and wildfire.

Consider other political issues about which most of the public eventually changed their minds because their beliefs and values were directly challenged—for example, child labor, woman suffrage, segregation, smoking, seatbelts, Pacific Northwest old-growth logging. Sometimes it takes a human generation for the public’s collective mind to change on an issue.

Before Smokey Bear brainwashed America, Americans had a more balanced attitude toward fire. Most Americans—particularly rural ones (who are now far fewer in both relative and absolute numbers)—saw fire as a tool and as a part of nature, like the tides, winds, and rains.

Converting the American public back to a balanced view about wildfire cannot be accomplished overnight. It will take decades. There is no way around it. If it were easy, it would have been done already.