Felling Trees to Restrain Wildfires Draws Heat; Experts disagree about the value of thinning forests to prevent forests from going up in flames

[Carlton, Jim](). **Wall Street Journal (Online)** [New York, N.Y] 16 Sep 2015: n/a.

1. Full text

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Abstract

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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif.--Western land managers are ramping up the use of a controversial practice to curtail devastating wildfires: removing smaller trees in fire-prone areas to save the entire forest from going up in flames.

The implementation of the method, known as thinning, has increased in national forests during the past 10 years to 1.79 million acres, up 34% from the 1.34 million acres in the prior 10-year period, according to preliminary U.S. Forest Service data.

The shift comes amid published studies, including findings by Forest Service researchers in 2011, concluding that intense thinning is the most effective way to reduce the likelihood of fires that can wipe out an entire forest.

"Thinning is a great tool," said Malcolm North, a scientist with the agency's Pacific Southwest Research Station office in Davis, Calif. "I often joke we need to get beavers on crack out there to start chewing down trees."

The projects have been credited with reducing the spread of several wildfires, including one in eastern Arizona that was slowed as it encroached on thousands of homes in 2011.

But some environmental groups say thinning is wasteful and unnecessary except around inhabited areas. They contend the practice can even make forests more fire prone by clearing the way for more sunlight, which allows plants and other flammable undergrowth to grow faster. They also are concerned that thinning destroys wildlife habitats.

"Thinning is driven in a lot of cases by the ability to sell logs, rather than what would be the most effective in protecting forests," said George Wuerthner of the Foundation for Deep Ecology, a San Francisco-based environmental group. The organization believes in letting nature take its course and not interfering, except when communities are threatened.

Other environmentalists support the practice, however, and are adopting it on lands they control. The Nature Conservancy this year hired crews to thin trees on part of 2,600 acres of private forestlands it acquired in 2010 around Independence Lake, 30 miles north of Lake Tahoe in Nevada.

Ed Smith, forest ecologist for the Arlington, Va.-based environmental group, said the land was purchased to protect the lake and its endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout. A massive fire, he said, could taint the lake with fish-killing sediment.

"Thinning needs to happen," Mr. Smith said, as a mechanical harvester felled telephone pole-sized conifer trees nearby. "It's ugly and painful, but it's got to be done."

One of the first major forest-thinning projects began near Flagstaff, Ariz. after an outbreak of area fires in 1996. Since then, foresters say drought, warmer temperatures and overgrown forests have fueled larger wildfires across the West.

Since 1999, about 50 fires of at least 200,000 acres have broken out in the lower 48 Western states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

In northern Arizona, the forest service in 2009 joined with with state and local groups on the Four Forest Restoration Initiative, which aims to cull trees on nearly one million acres during a 20-year period.

Some of the bigger projects have been aimed at protecting local economies. Lake Tahoe, for example, is home to 55,000 people whose tourism-based economy generates about $5 billion a year in revenue, according to the Tahoe Prosperity Center, a local nonprofit advocacy group.

"Preventing fire is protecting the economy and the community," said Heidi Hill Drumm, the group's executive director.

Following a 2007 wildfire that destroyed 3,100 acres and about 250 homes at South Lake Tahoe, forest service officials embarked on a 10,000-acre thinning project, now nearly halfway completed. Recently, crews working on the project loaded felled timber onto a logging truck in the woods behind a subdivision.

"I'm glad they're doing it because this whole town is a tinderbox," said Scott Spivack, a 41-year-old grocery clerk whose home abuts the forest.

But thinning is challenging work, due in part to mill closures across the West. A mill about an hour's drive from the Tahoe region recently closed and trucks now have to transport the logs more than two hours away, said Jeff Marsolais, forest supervisor of the agency's Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

"It has doubled the cost to treat an acre," Mr. Marsolais said, adding that funds for thinning, which can cost about $2,000 an acre, have been tight because of the rising costs of fighting Western wildfires.

With 52% of this fiscal year's $5.1 billion Forest Service budget set aside for fire suppression--up from 16% in 1995--the agency this month said it was forced to divert funds from other activities to battle blazes in the Northwest and elsewhere.

The Agriculture Department on Monday notified Congress it will have to transfer an additional $250 million to the Forest Service to cover wildfire costs for the rest of the year.

Mr. North, the scientist, recommends deliberately setting fires under controlled conditions, as well as thinning to cover more ground. But it's often difficult to get authorization from regulatory agencies to set such fires because of environmental restrictions and public concerns, he noted.

Another limitation is that many forests are too remote and the terrain is too steep to reach with logging equipment.

"Thinning is a great tool," said Mr. North, "but we are fighting with one hand behind our back."