

Don't Get Hosed By Political Firefighters

How Political Framing Influences Fire Policy

By Les AuCoin

The Bush White House carefully chose the phrase "healthy forests" to characterize its effort to increase logging in the public's national forests. It was a masterpiece of political "framing" – the art of creating a central organizing idea or context for an issue through use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. "Healthy forests" evokes a sense of environmental protection and personal safety at a time of deep fear of wildland fire.

"THE FIRE IS DESTROYING YELLOWSTONE—destroying it—and the Park Service is just sitting around, letting it happen!" Congressman Ralph Regula, a senior Republican from Ohio, was flushed with rage in the hearing room of the House Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee in Washington, D.C., that morning in June 1988.¹

Then Regula delivered the coup de grâce—a fact so awful that it would surely seal his argument: "It's so bad, the park's rivers are running *black!*" A collective gasp filled the hearing room. Yellowstone Park—the crown jewel in the national park system, the world's first national park—was being "devastated."

But the Yellowstone fires were not destroying this fire-adapted landscape any more than similar conflagrations had done over millennia. Throughout history, fire has worked through western forests, giving them a chance to reset nature's clock and renew themselves. But it is a rare politician who understands

wildfire ecology, and few if any scientists of any kind serve in the Congress. This may explain why politics tends to produce decision makers who, with several notable exceptions, seek to fireproof the forests--through thinning if they can, or, if they cannot, through salvage logging. At its core, American politics is anthropocentric -- human centered, not nature centered. Worse for the environment, politics abhors a vacuum. Faced with a massive natural disturbance like a wildlands fire, politicians cannot just sit idly by; no sir, they've got to get out that good wrench and be seen as fixing the problem! This is especially true in the age of the modern media--the 24/ 7 "infotainment industry" that looks for drama and action and showers coverage on politicians who provide them.

In 1988, the national news media chased a perfect storm: five fires had erupted in Yellowstone while the Park Service operated under a 16-year-old policy of letting fires run their course in fire-adapted ecosystems. For the infotainment industry, this was as good as it gets: the equivalent of the burning of Rome and the discovery of covert pyromaniacs rolled into one. Unburdened by scientific knowledge, reporters and politicians pummeled the Park Service in an echo chamber of escalating criticism.² Montana senator Max Baucus, a Democrat, took the U.S. Senate floor to declare that the national fire policy was "responsible for much of the injury caused by this year's forest fires."³ Then-senator Malcolm Wallop, a Republican from Wyoming, demanded the firing of

National Park Service director William Penn Mott, a fellow Republican, saying, "He continues to celebrate [the fires] while all the rest of us are suffering."⁴

The Park Service's fire policy, however, was based on peer-reviewed science, which showed how fire had shaped the Yellowstone landscape and its biota for millennia. Many of Yellowstone's plant species are fire adapted. The cones of lodgepole pine, a species that makes up nearly 80 percent of Yellowstone's forests, are a good example. Sealed by resin, they crack in the intense heat of fire and release seeds to begin life afresh.

But try to explain these facts to a television news reporter who operates on 10-second sound bites. Or to a congressman or senator who makes a political living off of them. On the tube, that great arbiter of modern American reality, Yellowstone scientists and managers came off as ostrich-headed bumblers muttering a language from another world.

It was a rout. Science was mugged by politics as whipped-up TV viewers across the nation flooded the offices of their senators and representatives with one message: suppress the fires without further delay. On July 21, as the flames began to expand rapidly, the Park Service lifted its national fire policy. The agency's decision was partly a capitulation to overwhelming political pressure, especially from western senators, who have disproportionate power in the Congress because senators are elected two to a state, regardless of a state's population. In fairness, the decision was also based on the intensity of the fire,

which raced across the crowns of trees, shooting out firebrands up to a mile ahead of the front and threatening nearby human populations outside the park.

But if the Park Service thought that its about-face would still its critics, it was wrong. Detractors refused to believe Interior Secretary Don Hodel when he told Congress that he had suspended the “let burn” policy. Meanwhile, Hodel’s decision incited criticism from Park Service fire scientists,⁵ independent wildfire biologists, and environmentalists, who believe that bulldozers and other fire-fighting equipment cause more harm to a landscape than wildland fire.

Today, in 2005, the Park Service’s national fire policy – long since reinstated and adjusted to better protect human populations and property – has worked successfully on subsequent fires in Yellowstone. Nevertheless, the political storm caused by the 1988 fire gave a strong hand to logging advocates on all federal lands, who make the argument that dead trees ought to be logged instead of “wasted,” although nothing in nature is ever wasted.

The lesson is unmistakable: the media thrive on drama, especially fear,⁶ while the political marketplace almost always operates on the understanding that there is profit in satisfying the crowd.

Today, 17 years after the fire reset nature’s clock, Yellowstone’s plants are brimming with youthful vigor. Independent scientists report that although flames consumed aboveground parts of grasses and forbs, the belowground root systems remained unharmed.⁷ Researchers Jay Anderson of Idaho State University, William Romme of Colorado State University, and other scientists

have documented the greater Yellowstone ecosystem's remarkable but not unexpected recovery.⁸ Vegetation in most burned areas quickly regenerated. Water flows have increased in many streams without causing the severe erosion that some feared. Fish and other forms of aquatic life are abundant again. Mammal populations are still healthy – albeit reapportioned to conform to natural habitat changes.

Writing for the *High Country News* in October 1994, reporter Michael Hofferber described the park's incredible resiliency just six years after the fire:

Crouched over a metal screen like a gold rush prospector and peering through its grid at the forest floor, [researcher] Cindi Persichetty calls out what she sees through each square-inch opening: "Line four: moss, moss, litter, seedling, seedling, seedling." Another Idaho State University graduate student, Mike O'Hara, sits on a log recording the findings on a clipboard. The charred remains of lodgepole pine loom above them, groaning in the morning breeze that rises off the Madison River in Yellowstone National Park. The forest floor is carpeted with thousands of bright green seedlings, each less than a foot high.⁹

Findings of this kind prompt John Varley, director of the Yellowstone Center for Resources, to observe that a forest's rebirth after a fire disturbance can leave the ecosystem and its biodiversity healthier than they were before the flames erupted. Overwhelmingly, conservation biologists agree with him.

Yet, since the 1988 Yellowstone fires, the rush to “fix” the wildland fire problem has escalated across the West. Oregon’s July 2002 Biscuit Fire showed that naïveté, lack of knowledge, and deception still underscore public debate. Although climate change, fire suppression, and logging are among the primary agents in transforming western forests into tinderboxes,¹⁰ the timber industry and the Forest Service’s “solution” is to ramp up logging.¹¹

The Biscuit Fire was the nation’s largest in the summer of 2002 and the largest in Oregon’s history. When, after 120 days, it finally died, its outer boundary encompassed nearly 500,000 acres, including the fabled Kalmiopsis Wilderness and 160,000 acres of roadless areas. But the fire did not burn all of those acres. It left a mosaic of live and burned trees, and many forest stands inside the “burn” were untouched.

President George W. Bush cited the Biscuit Fire as an example of why he has given a green light to the timber industry to mow through forest stands across the West. Traveling to Medford, Oregon, in 1992 while the Biscuit blazed, the president announced a plan he said would reduce the number of conflagrations. He called it his “Healthy Forests Initiative.” The program was enacted into law on December 3, 2003, as the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. It relies on the timber industry to thin forests in the deep outback and exempts this logging from the National Forest Management Act, the Appeals Reform Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act—laws that Congressman Mark Udall, among others, describes as the fundamental laws of sound forest management.¹²

A further, conspicuous problem with the Healthy Forests Restoration Act is that the timber industry is not exactly a philanthropic movement. When it “thins” trees it expects to make a profit. Thus, it must cut big (commercially valuable) trees to offset the cost of thinning smaller ones. The president’s plan, then, means loggers are taking large, fire-resistant trees and leaving smaller trees, which are more susceptible to fire. An examination of Oregon’s 2002 Tiller Fire demonstrated the shortcoming of this tactic:: the most severely burned places were previously logged tracts from which older, larger trees had been replaced with plantations of smaller trees.¹³

These facts were smothered in the congressional debate on the president’s misleadingly named plan; the bill sailed through the House on a vote of 256-170 and cleared the Senate by 80-14. What political factors were at work? Mainly the “Mr. Goodwrench” syndrome, in which pressured legislators feel compelled to act as problem solvers even through they may be making matters worse.

Ignorance or avoidance of environmental knowledge is one thing. A deliberate frontal attack on forest science is another. The Healthy Forests Initiative was developed by individuals who used fear of wildland fire to increase logging and mask their dismantling of President Bill Clinton’s science-based 1993 Northwest Forest Plan.¹⁴ The Clinton plan reduced the public timber cut in the region by 75 percent to protect viable populations of the spotted owl and other wildlife, which were threatened by logging and habitat loss.¹⁵

For the 2005 Biscuit Fire “restoration” alone, the Bush administration’s Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) called for a “salvage” of 372 million board feet of timber – some 170 million board feet more than the normal yearly cut on the public lands of Oregon and Washington combined. Leading biological experts contend that postfire logging can be more harmful than fire.¹⁶ Heavy equipment damages delicate, traumatized soils; log skidding creates erosion and river siltation; and removal of fallen trees robs the soil of nutrients and destroys woody debris needed as a lifeboat for dependent species until the regenerating forest begins to produce its own “new” large dead wood structures, typically a century later.¹⁷ Logging trucks carry the seeds of noxious weeds that, in the absence of postfire competition, multiply rapidly and choke natural vegetation. The Biscuit EIS also targeted 8,173 acres of inventoried roadless areas for industrial logging.

Mark Rey, the U.S. undersecretary of agriculture, is President Bush’s top political appointee for the Forest Service and is responsible for overseeing the Healthy Forests Initiative. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Rey was a top lobbyist for the American Timber and Pulp Association, the largest timber industry trade association in the nation.¹⁸ In that role he tried in vain to stop logging curtailments called for in the Northwest Forest Plan. Today, under the rubric of “forest health,” he has succeeded where he failed throughout the 1990s. He has also weakened the Clinton administration’s roadless forest protections in Oregon and elsewhere.¹⁹

How is it, one might ask, that legislation like the Bush administration's so-called Healthy Forests Initiative can sail through Congress when polls consistently show strong public support for a sound and healthy environment?²⁰ The answer is "framing" – the art of creating a central organizing idea or context for an event or proposal and suggesting the issue through use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration.²¹ This is why the Bush White House chose the phrase "healthy forests" to characterize its effort to increase logging in the public's national forests. A masterpiece of Orwellian doublespeak, "healthy forests" evokes a sense of environmental protection and personal safety at a time of deep fear of wildland fire. (Remember, in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, safety is a fundamental human requirement.)

Successful framing is a powerful tool in molding political opinion. An experiment described by Thomas E. Patterson, professor of political science at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, illustrates this point:

Cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky told a group of subjects to imagine that an unusual disease was expected to kill six hundred people and then asked them to choose between treatment A, which was expected to save two hundred, and treatment B, which offered a one-third probability of saving all six hundred and a two-thirds probability of saving none of them. By 72 percent to 28 percent, the subjects preferred treatment A. A matched group of subjects was provided

the same information about the disease and asked to choose between treatment A, under which four hundred were expected to die, and treatment B, which offered a one-third probability that nobody would die and a two-thirds probability that all six hundred would die. In this case, treatment B was preferred 78 percent to 22 percent. The choice given to both groups was identical, but one choice was framed in terms of the number of people who would live if the action were taken, and the second one was framed in terms of the number who would die. By altering the way in which the choice was framed, people's preferences were completely changed.²²

The broadcast media, which Americans depend on for most of their news,²³ play a major role in communicating politically framed issues. This has had an unfortunate impact on political discourse—in part because nuance and analysis are difficult to fit into an average 10-second sound bite. These media, especially television, tend to favor attention-getting political frames rather than ones that elucidate issues.²⁴ In the modern symbiosis between the media and elected officials, many politicians, needing attention for personal advancement, are loath to challenge political frames communicated by the media.

To be sure, past government policy on the land and its natural processes has produced some notable ecological achievements—the Wilderness Act; the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Alaska National Interest Land Conservation acts; the establishment of national parks; the creation of the Environmental Protection

Agency; and many others. But much of today's sophisticated antienvironmental framing is built atop a history of human domination of nature that Roderick Nash describes so well in his seminal book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. From the first light of time, through the mid-19th-century period of Manifest Destiny, the New Deal, and into the modern age, Nash describes American self-identity as forged in no small part by taming the frontiers and, when the chips were down, placing humans above nature — not as a part of it.²⁵

In this spirit, wildland fire in the West — and the threat of it — seem to have created a reflexive impulse for logging, and to make the most of it, the Bush administration has lifted bedrock environmental laws that protect the health of the nation's forests. Perhaps the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, sharing his perspective on America some 170 years ago, best pertain to the agenda of politicians who seek to reverse many hard-won gains in the science of forest ecology: "They may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet."²⁶

Endnotes

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1. I served with Congressman Ralph Regula on this committee, which has jurisdiction for national parks and forests. His words in the committee session were so striking that I've never forgotten them.
2. Conrad Smith, *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1992).
3. U.S. Senator Max Baucus, *Congressional Record*, September 23, 1988.
4. U.S. Senator Malcolm Wallop, *Salt Lake City Tribune*, September 10, 1988.
5. John Varley, Ph.D., director of the Yellowstone Center for Resources, personal interview, June 24, 2004.
6. B. Kauffman, "Death Rides the Forest: Perceptions of Fire, Land Use, and Ecological Restoration of Western Forests," *Conservation Biology* 18, no. 4 (2004): 878-882.
7. John Varley interview, June 24, 2004.
8. M. Hofferber, "Yellowstone Fires Produce New Trees, Not Meadows," *High Country News*, October 17, 2004.
9. Ibid.
10. D. A. DellaSala et al., "Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: A Synthesis of Fire Policy and Science," *Conservation Biology* 18, no. 4 (2004): 976-986.
11. "Old Growth Reserve Logging Begins at Biscuit," *Oregonian*, March 3, 2005.

12. M. Udall, "Our Publicly Owned Forest Are Being Subverted," *High Country News*, October 17, 2004.
13. Karla Bird, natural resources officer, Umpqua National Forest, as quoted by Michael Milstein, *Oregonian*, September 1, 2002.
14. Interview with Dr. Jack Ward Thomas, March 17, 2005. Dr. Thomas, who would become Clinton's Forest Service chief, led a group of more than 100 scientists of various disciplines--the Forest Ecosystem Management Assessment Team--in developing the Northwest Forest Plan. The plan was unveiled in July 1993.
15. Judge William Dwyer of the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court enjoined the Forest Service from offering timber sales in Oregon and Washington, for failure to manage forests to ensure that the spotted owl, an "indicator species," would be managed to "maintain viable populations" under the National Forest Management Act.
16. J. E. Franklin, "Comments Submitted to the U.S. Forest Service on Its Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Biscuit Recovery Project," January 20, 2004.
17. Ibid.
18. "Speaker Biography: Mark Rey," found on website of the Ecosystem Management Initiative (School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor); www.snre.umich.edu/ecomgt//events/bios/reym.htm.

19. P. Dobbyn, "Roadless Rule Exemptions Sought," *Anchorage Daily News*, July 10, 2003.
20. Poll, *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 2001. Results showed that when the environment and the economy are in conflict, by a 50 percent to 36 percent margin Americans believe the environment should be given the priority; 14 percent were "unsure."
21. For the concept of "framing" I am indebted to Thomas Patterson, author of *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
22. Patterson, *Out of Order*, p. 80.
23. "How Americans Get Their News," Gallup survey, December 31, 2002.
24. Brookings Institution, "Hess Report on Campaign Coverage on Nightly Network News," 1988.
25. R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
26. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (1835; reprint, New York: Knopf, 1945), p. 2; as quoted in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, p. 23.