

## Facing future wildfires, a community fights for its forest

15 November 2021

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The area is nightmarish, deadly terrain for wildland firefighters. Its canyons—deeper than the Grand Canyon—tend to fill with thick smoke and channel unpredictable, fire-stoking winds. Less than an hour after Golden’s crew landed, they were in trouble. Scattered amid smoke so thick the whirling helicopter rotors barely seemed to stir it, the firefighters unshouldered their heavy packs and fled the flames, leaving behind tools, water bottles and even a wallet. They were shaken but alive.

That aborted attack on the Mustang Fire made it clear that terrain and weather, not firefighters, would determine how long and how far the blaze would burn through the backcountry. “There was no access,” Fritz Cluff, the fire manager for the Salmon-Challis National Forest, where the fire was located, told me recently. “It was on a really ugly piece of ground.”

As the fire roared through thick stands of scaly-barked Engelmann spruce, subalpine fir and lodgepole pine, it drew closer to the small communities of North Fork and Gibbonsville, where cabins are tucked into conifer groves on either side of Highway 93. Firefighting crews prepared to defend homes by clearing brush, setting up hose lines and starting backburns, which clear out tinder on the ground. In the nearby town of Salmon, the sky was the apocalyptic orange now familiar across much of the Western U.S.

In the end, the fire spared the towns, in part because of a forest-thinning project that had started the spring before in the Hughes Creek drainage, an area of wooded canyons set between the communities and the backcountry. After years of planning by the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group, a local collaborative convened by a conservation non-profit, thick stands of trees had been selectively logged to help protect homes. The logging didn’t leave dramatic gashes of downed trees or abrupt, clear-cut expanses; it had been designed to thin the forest, turning tightly packed clumps of overgrown trees into roomier groves that a person could easily stroll through without getting snagged.

In a sense, that’s what thinning is supposed to encourage wildfires to do: amble along the forest floor rather than brush up against tree branches and carry flames from trunk to treetop, torching entire stands and making firefighting untenable. Along the Highway 93 corridor, the thinning had helped keep the fire at bay. “These treatments were well placed, well implemented and were clearly a practice that paid significant dividends,” a 2013 Forest Service report on the fire concluded. The thinned spots were places where fire crews could comfortably dig fire lines and set backburns, as long as the weather cooperated. “From a safety standpoint, [the firefighters] didn’t feel like we were putting them in a bad situation,” Cluff said.

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**PEOPLE IN THE SMALL TOWN** of Salmon and its even smaller neighbour, Challis, refer to the land as “country,” a term befitting the expansive landscape but also an apt description of who manages it. In Lemhi and Custer counties, where Salmon (population 3,096) and Challis (population 758) are located, the federal government—primarily the Forest Service—administers more than 90 per cent of the land. Vast stretches of the Salmon-Challis have a high level of protection, including 1.3 million

acres (526,091 ha.) of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, the largest contiguous wilderness area in the Lower 48.

On a sunny morning in early April, I met Charles “Chuck” Mark, the forest supervisor tasked with managing the Salmon-Challis. Mark has held his position and lived in Salmon since 2013. From the agency headquarters south of town, we drove up Williams Creek Road, a popular local access point for campgrounds, fishing, hiking and hunting. As we climbed a ridge, we passed fields swept by the long arms of centre pivot sprinklers, winding through a steep sagebrush canyon and into mixed stands of conifers. Mark, who started working for the agency as a seasonal firefighter four decades ago, wears his uniform neatly and looks as if he could hike many miles to a backcountry fire. When asked a question, he typically pauses to reflect before giving a detailed answer. He told me that wildfire is his biggest challenge in leading the forest.

At the top of the ridge, we got out and stood above a natural clearing. A blanket of trees stretched dozens of miles from the Bighorn Crags, a smudge on the horizon where granite peaks cradle alpine lakes, to the edge of the town of Salmon. A Cassin’s finch trilled above us. Mark, who was wearing an earflap hat with the flaps tacked up, leaned his wiry frame against the door of his government-issued white Ford Explorer. He pointed out stretches of deep green forest splotched with light brown—places where beetle outbreaks had killed the trees. This area, dissected by deep and steep canyons, is Mark’s primary concern when it comes to protecting the people below—his friends, neighbours and critics—from wildfire. Since the Mustang Fire, the Forest Service has overseen limited logging in the Salmon-Challis, but Mark sees a need to greatly increase it. “It isn’t a question of if,” he said. “It’s *when* we’re going to have fire. ... So we’ve got to start poking some holes in this.” After the devastating 1910 wildfire known as the Big Burn, when flames raced across millions of acres in the Northern Rockies in just a couple of days, killing scores of people, the Forest Service began extinguishing fires as quickly as possible. But Western forests are adapted to wildfire; some lodgepole pine cones, for example, don’t release their seeds until they are scorched. The agency’s firefighting actions have drastically altered the natural cycles of the forests. Over the last century, more and more trees, shrubs, logs and duff—what wildfire scientists collectively call fuel—have accumulated, priming the landscape for larger and hotter fires.

Other forces have also made the region and its people more vulnerable. As neighbourhoods and isolated homes expand into wooded areas, blazes are more likely to damage property and endanger lives; in 2020, nearly 18,000 structures burned in wildfires in the U.S. And climate change has led to less snow, more extreme weather, and hotter, drier conditions overall, driving longer, more intense fire seasons. Researchers from the University of Idaho and Columbia University estimate that human-caused climate change has doubled the amount of forest burned in the Western U.S. since 1984.

In recent years, wildfires have destroyed entire towns; Paradise, Calif., and Blue River, Ore., among them. With the stakes so high, there’s a major push across the Forest Service’s ranks, from leadership to on-the-ground staff, to manage the landscape in a way that reduces the risk of devastating consequences. For the agency, that means thinning forests and setting prescribed burns—controlled fires in specific areas to clear out the underbrush, so that subsequent fires burn less intensely.

From the overlook, Mark pointed out an example of the kind of cutting he’s trying to avoid: Three bright emerald patches of trees stood out among the deep green and beetle-kill brown of the surrounding forest—decades-old clear-cuts. There, young trees were crowding each other in what’s known in forestry lingo as doghair thickets, dense growth that could spur instead of slow flames.

Mark wants to explore every option available to expand thinning and controlled burns in the Salmon-Challis. One mechanism at his disposal is a federal agency planning tool called a categorical exclusion—a way to quickly and efficiently move a proposed project forward. Classic examples of projects covered by categorical exclusions are painting a picnic table or mowing a lawn—routine tasks with little environmental impact.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which governs federal agencies’ decision-making on projects that affect the environment, requires agencies to be clear about what they’re doing, where they’re doing it and what the impacts might be. There are three different ways of doing this, but categorical exclusions allow the government to be as tight-lipped as possible. The other two

options—environmental assessments and environmental impact statements—are more involved: They both mandate objection periods during which the public can submit critiques that the agency must answer. Under categorical exclusions, however, the agency doesn't have to provide rigorous documentation of possible environmental harm or justify its actions to commenters—or even respond to comments at all. The only way for the public to get that kind of response is a lawsuit.

Over the last two decades, Congress and agency officials have expanded categorical exclusions well beyond picnic tables and blades of grass. In a 2018 federal funding bill, for example, Congress tacked on a new categorical exclusion for thinning projects of up to 3,000 acres (1,214 ha.). The Forest Service has also expanded its own authority to use categorical exclusions through administrative changes.

An analysis of Forest Service NEPA planning conducted by researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of California, Davis, published last year, found that between 2005 and 2018, more than 80 per cent of Forest Service projects were approved with categorical exclusions. Most of those projects were routine and of little environmental consequence, things like renewing a rafting company's permit or repairing a bathroom. But recently there's been an uptick in exclusions that cover broad swaths of land. This concerns agency watchdogs, who worry that landscape-level projects are being carried out with the minimum level of analysis and public engagement.

In October 2020, Mark released plans for two sweeping categorical exclusions on the Salmon-Challis intended to combat wildfire risk. One proposed allowing prescribed fire and hand-cutting timber on 2.4 million acres (971,246 ha.)—the entire forest, except for designated wilderness or roadless areas. The other proposed thinning and prescribed fire on an overlapping 1.4 million acres (566,560 ha.). Neither included commercial logging.

A national review of agency planning documents by the environmental organization WildEarth Guardians found that nearly 3.8 million acres (1,537,805 ha.) of projects were proposed under categorical exclusions between January and March of 2020. The review's authors found that many of the projects lacked specifics regarding where activities like thinning and road building would occur, and there was often no indication of the role, if any, the public had in influencing the agency's decisions. "There is rarely an opportunity for meaningful public involvement," the report noted. "And in many instances the public is left in the dark as to the rationale behind the authorization or any extraordinary circumstances until the project has been approved."

In a December phone call, Mark was frank about why he wanted to use categorical exclusions at a landscape scale. "We're trying to ... start treating more acres," he said. "I think we're too far behind already. But to start gaining some ground, I think that's what's needed." What Mark didn't foresee was that wielding this tool, even to mitigate wildfire risk, would stoke the frustrations of groups that had felt left out of the Forest Service's plans in the past.

**TO REDUCE THE IMPACTS** of wildfire, the Forest Service and Western politicians harp on the importance of increasing logging and controlled burning. But some environmentalists and ecologists—particularly those that prioritize a hands-off approach to forest management—argue that aggressive thinning has little potential to change fire behaviour. "You just can't do it on enough of the landscape to make a big-enough difference," said Dominick DellaSala, the chief scientist for the environmental non-profit Earth Island Institute's Wild Heritage program, which focuses on forest protection. "And even if you could, it only will work under low to moderate fire weather."

Thinning can also make fires worse and even damage ecosystems, he added. Wind speeds can increase in thinned stands, driving fires even farther and faster, and logging-access roads damage wildlife habitat through erosion. Those same roads also make it easier for people to go out and start fires—more than 80 per cent of wildfires are sparked by humans.

DellaSala has seen firsthand how out-of-control fires can destroy communities. Last September, the Almeda Fire ripped through his hometown of Talent, Ore.; it killed three people and levelled thousands of homes. With that in mind, he thinks fire protection should start in backyards rather than the backwoods, and be small and targeted rather than forest-wide. "We can be surgical about how we treat the landscape, go to the places that are closest to the homes and work from the home out," he said.

While opinions differ on the impact of thinning, ecologists and forest managers generally agree that prescribed fires can help reduce the likelihood of megafires. Intentional burning by Indigenous nations shaped Western forests for millennia. The genocide and dispossession of Indigenous people by European colonizers disrupted the links between humans, fires and forests. Programs like the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network are working to repair those relationships and return cultural fire to the landscape by building partnerships between Indigenous fire practitioners and the government employees responsible for controlled burns.

The Indigenous Peoples Burning Network is not yet active in Idaho, but tribal agencies in the state are working to get more fire on the ground, including in partnership with the Forest Service. “Prescribed burning is something that we do as much as we can,” said Jeff Handel, who leads the Nez Perce Tribe’s fire-management program. Handel also participates in the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council, a group of tribal, federal and state governmental and agency representatives, as well as private citizens, created in late 2020 to promote planned fires and share resources. Tribal and federal agencies already partner on putting out wildfires, Handel explained, so it makes sense for them to work together on prescribed fires. “We fight fires that way,” he said. “I think we should also do our forest planning and burning that way.”

**DRIVING INTO SALMON** from the north, you emerge from steep-walled forests into a rolling valley bottom. In April, wobbly calves stood next to their mothers in a pasture at the edge of town, beneath a Confederate flag. An hour south in Challis, a large billboard depicting blackened trees against a red backdrop blamed devastating wildfires on people who oppose logging: “Environmentalists... you own this! Log it, graze it, or burn it!” Both counties are overwhelmingly white and Republican.

At a picnic table at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 93 in Challis, Dolores Ivie, a former administrator for the local power company, schoolteacher and 2019 inductee into the Idaho Republican Party Hall of Fame, ran through a litany of frustrations with how Forest Service officials and D.C. politicians have managed the Salmon-Challis. Ivie, along with many in the area, felt like the Forest Service wasn’t serving their needs; instead, it was reintroducing wolves, expanding wilderness and working too closely with a local conservation organization. “People want use of their federal lands,” she said, for jobs, firewood, recreation and grazing. And they want to feel like the Forest Service is listening to them, she added.

As we sat under the bright but chilly spring sun, Ivie wore sunglasses over readers and smoked Basic brand cigarettes, neatly tucking the butts back into the pack after extinguishing them. Ivie coordinates a citizens’ group called the Lemhi-Custer Grassroots Advisory, or the LCGA, created to amplify local concerns over how the Forest Service is managing the land. She was chosen to lead it for a simple reason: “I have organizational skills that scare most people,” Ivie said, cracking a wry grin.

The LCGA formed as a counterpoint to two other Salmon-Challis stakeholder groups. Both are what’s called a forest collaborative: an association of people with diverse interests in a particular forest who debate issues like wildfire risk and habitat restoration, then offer their advice to Forest Service managers. Forest collaboratives rose to prominence in the 2000s and 2010s as a way to involve communities in federal land management, though they’re not led by the Forest Service—instead, a group such as an environmental organization typically convenes them—and they lack official decision-making authority. Still, the agency generally looks to these groups to help develop plans and build awareness and consensus around upcoming projects. There are two Salmon-Challis collaboratives: the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group, which helped plan the fuel treatments that were effective during the Mustang Fire, and the Central Idaho Public Lands Collaborative. Both groups are facilitated by Salmon Valley Stewardship, the local conservation organization whose influence chafed at Ivie.

The catalyzing moment for the LCGA’s creation came at a public meeting in 2017, when a Forest Service staffer, who is also the former head of Salmon Valley Stewardship, was presenting proposals for revisions to the Salmon-Challis forest plan. Forest plans are influential, detailed documents: They guide all of the agency’s decisions on a given national forest. But when one member of the public asked a question, Ivie recalled, the staffer “basically told her to sit down and be quiet; they didn’t

want to hear from a bunch of ‘angry villagers.’” Today, Ivie’s SUV and other local rigs sport yellow stickers with black lettering declaring themselves Angry Villagers. After years of feeling unrepresented on decisions that impact their community, “that was the icing on the cake,” Ivie said. “That’s what started the LCGA.”

Federal land planners often cite collaboration and public participation as fundamental to effective management. But there’s no set model for how collaboratives function or who gets to participate in them—no framework to balance interests and ensure that a truly diverse range of viewpoints is represented. Members of the LCGA felt left out; they see the collaboratives as more accessible to environmental professionals, who, after all, get paid to sit in long meetings about forest policies. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, environmentalist critics, like author and activist George Wuerthner, have argued that collaboratives are a waste of time that benefit industry at the expense of wildlife and land protection.

Today, the LCGA has more than 300 members, Ivie said, who favour more economic activity and fewer protective land designations. They’ve organized public-comment submissions, rallied people to public meetings, been active in the op-ed pages of local newspapers, met with their representatives in Congress and aired grievances to the Forest Service.

The relationship between the group and the agency has improved since the heated meeting in 2017. “We’ve had input into some issues that have changed their minds,” Ivie said, including a large logging project meant to reduce wildfire risk. They also spoke up about the pair of categorical exclusions Mark proposed late last year, the wide-ranging plans to increase thinning and burning on the Salmon-Challis. LCGA members criticized the agency for presenting sprawling plans with so few details, and not including more opportunities for commercial cutting; they’d rather see trees logged than burned. “Resource use is a high priority for the two communities,” Ivie said. “That’s what we survive on.”

**TIMBER MANAGEMENT** is foundational to the Forest Service. When the federal government created the agency in 1905, it was supposed to prevent wholesale clear-cutting and conserve forests for future generations. But the agency disregarded the knowledge of the Indigenous peoples who had stewarded and shaped the landscape for thousands of years. Instead, it focused on what agency leaders and politicians considered sustainable harvesting.

Most logging on national forests happens through timber sales: The Forest Service outlines where and what kind of cutting it wants done, then private companies bid for the chance to harvest the trees. As part of the process, the Forest Service often offers large, fire-resistant trees—which are more valuable because of their size and tight grain—as an incentive for companies to bid on the thinning that, in many cases, is a sale’s true objective. “Something’s got to carry the load,” Mark said. “Otherwise, you’re not going to be able to sell the sale and you won’t get anything done.”

Sometimes, however, the agency can sidestep this economic model. Unprofitable timberwork on the Salmon-Challis is done through partnerships with the Idaho and Montana conservation corps. These work programs channel the spirit of the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps—nicknamed “Roosevelt’s Tree Army”—which, in the 1930s, employed millions of workers who planted billions of trees. Mark doesn’t think today’s programs are large enough to make a difference on a landscape scale. But the Biden administration’s American Jobs Plan, which proposes a \$10-billion investment in a 21st-century twist on the CCC called the Civilian Climate Corps, could help scale up similar forest-thinning efforts.

Today, annual timber harvests on Forest Service land are less than a quarter of what they were in the 1980s, in part, at least in the Northwest, because of endangered species protections for spotted owls. In towns like Salmon and Challis, the decline of public-land logging has left a shell of a local timber economy as large mills closed and hundreds of local timber jobs dwindled to just a handful.

One of the few timbermen still making a living logging on the Salmon-Challis is Joe Frauenberger, a Challis local who started his own company, Twin Peaks Timber, in 2017. It’s a small outfit, with just two employees, and it isn’t geared toward the kind of large-scale logging that occurs in places with an active commercial timber industry, like the Cascades in Oregon, where clear-cuts might cover hundreds or thousands of acres. Frauenberger only has the capacity to cut about a couple hundred acres per year.

And unlike big companies, which send their wood to mills to be turned into lumber, Twin Peaks mainly sells logs for use in local wood stoves. In Lemhi and Custer counties, about a third of households depend on firewood as their main source of heat. Twin Peaks Timber also provides logs and stumps for habitat restoration projects, and does tree-trimming work and other odd jobs around town that require heavy machinery.

Frauenberger said his relationship with the Forest Service has helped his business get all the timber it needs, though it doesn't hurt that he's the only show in town and there's no competition for the small sales he's buying. But Mark doesn't think there's enough local capacity to do the kind of large-scale projects he sees as necessary to reduce fire risk and protect the towns on the edge of the forest—hence the two huge categorical exclusions he proposed in late 2020.

**AFTER YEARS OF FRUSTRATION** with the Forest Service and each other, members of environmental organizations, the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group collaborative and Ivie's group, the LCGA, found something to agree on: No one liked the categorical exclusions Mark had proposed for the Salmon-Challis. "Both sides disagree on a lot," said Josh Johnson, who participates in the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group as a staffer for the Idaho Conservation League, an environmental non-profit. "Where we agree is that the Forest Service hasn't done the best job at public involvement."

Environmental groups argued that the projects would indeed have significant environmental impacts and called for a more in-depth planning process. Members of the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group balked at the assertion, in planning documents, that they'd approved of the project—they hadn't. The LCGA complained that the plans were a pet project of environmentalists and didn't include enough logging. All sides agreed that more details were needed to assess the impacts and justifications for the proposals. They wanted to know where projects would occur, and how and when they would be carried out. In short, they felt like Mark was going about this the wrong way. "Get the input from the beginning," Ivie said; to her, the solution seemed obvious. "Don't come out with a decision and then get clobbered by it."

After receiving that community feedback—and seeing other national forests get sued for similar landscape-level categorical exclusions—Mark put a pause on the proposals. "Some people are uncomfortable, and I knew that coming in," he said. "But I guarantee you get another (fire) that's threatening this ridge with a smoke cloud that's 30,000 feet in the air, I know you're going to be uncomfortable." At the end of the day, Mark's priority is not how the thinning and prescribed fire treatments are planned, it's figuring out ways to make sure that they're actually getting done.

Meanwhile, as Mark decides what to do next—whether to pursue the categorical exclusions or do a more extensive environmental assessment—smaller projects are already underway. This spring and summer, a commercial timber company is logging 872 acres (353 ha.) and shipping the logs 200 miles (322 kilometres) north for milling. It's the largest sale in the area in years, and one that will thin the forest to put firebreaks between the millions of acres of backcountry and the town of Salmon in the valley below. For that project, the Forest Service did sit down with the LCGA to hash out details, giving Ivie the sense that the agency was getting better at involving the community. "I don't think it matters how you get there, but that you get there, and you start waking up to why people feel the way that they feel," Ivie told me. "That's kind of where we are right now, taking steps in that direction. They're baby steps, but they're in the right direction."

In April, after Mark showed me the trees above Salmon that are bound to burn sooner or later, we wound back down the canyon. There, on the side of the ridge facing Salmon, firefighters stand a better chance of stopping a fire threatening the town, because flames are more likely to die down as they move downslope. As the SUV ground over gravel and through spring snowmelt, we passed signs marking the bounds of the logging project. The trees that will be cut were ringed with a line of blue spray paint.

The next time a fire starts in the forest, firefighters will likely be positioned among the remaining trees, waiting to fight the flames. "We're trying to be strategic about it," Mark explained, by focusing on the most advantageous places for firefighters to take a stand against a blaze. "Then we might get the opportunity to at least slow it down, and maybe, in places, stop it," Mark said. "But there's no guarantees."

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From the overlook, Mark pointed out an example of the kind of cutting he’s trying to avoid: Three bright emerald patches of trees stood out among the deep green and beetle-kill brown of the surrounding forest—decades-old clear-cuts. There, young trees were crowding each other in what’s known in forestry lingo as doghair thickets, dense growth that could spur instead of slow flames.

Mark wants to explore every option available to expand thinning and controlled burns in the Salmon-Challis. One mechanism at his disposal is a federal agency planning tool called a categorical exclusion—a way to quickly and efficiently move a proposed project forward. Classic examples of projects covered by categorical exclusions are painting a picnic table or mowing a lawn—routine tasks with little environmental impact.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which governs federal agencies' decision-making on projects that affect the environment, requires agencies to be clear about what they're doing, where they're doing it and what the impacts might be. There are three different ways of doing this, but categorical exclusions allow the government to be as tight-lipped as possible. The other two options—environmental assessments and environmental impact statements—are more involved: They both mandate objection periods during which the public can submit critiques that the agency must answer. Under categorical exclusions, however, the agency doesn't have to provide rigorous documentation of possible environmental harm or justify its actions to commenters—or even respond to comments at all. The only way for the public to get that kind of response is a lawsuit. Over the last two decades, Congress and agency officials have expanded categorical exclusions well beyond picnic tables and blades of grass. In a 2018 federal funding bill, for example, Congress tacked on a new categorical exclusion for thinning projects of up to 3,000 acres (1,214 ha.). The Forest Service has also expanded its own authority to use categorical exclusions through administrative changes.

An analysis of Forest Service NEPA planning conducted by researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of California, Davis, published last year, found that between 2005 and 2018, more than 80 per cent of Forest Service projects were approved with categorical exclusions. Most of those projects were routine and of little environmental consequence, things like renewing a rafting company's permit or repairing a bathroom. But recently there's been an uptick in exclusions that cover broad swaths of land. This concerns agency watchdogs, who worry that landscape-level projects are being carried out with the minimum level of analysis and public engagement.

In October 2020, Mark released plans for two sweeping categorical exclusions on the Salmon-Challis intended to combat wildfire risk. One proposed allowing prescribed fire and hand-cutting timber on 2.4 million acres (971,246 ha.)—the entire forest, except for designated wilderness or roadless areas. The other proposed thinning and prescribed fire on an overlapping 1.4 million acres (566,560 ha.). Neither included commercial logging.

A national review of agency planning documents by the environmental organization WildEarth Guardians found that nearly 3.8 million acres (1,537,805 ha.) of projects were proposed under categorical exclusions between January and March of 2020. The review's authors found that many of the projects lacked specifics regarding where activities like thinning and road building would occur, and there was often no indication of the role, if any, the public had in influencing the agency's decisions. "There is rarely an opportunity for meaningful public involvement," the report noted. "And in many instances the public is left in the dark as to the rationale behind the authorization or any extraordinary circumstances until the project has been approved."

In a December phone call, Mark was frank about why he wanted to use categorical exclusions at a landscape scale. "We're trying to ... start treating more acres," he said. "I think we're too far behind already. But to start gaining some ground, I think that's what's needed." What Mark didn't foresee was that wielding this tool, even to mitigate wildfire risk, would stoke the frustrations of groups that had felt left out of the Forest Service's plans in the past.

**TO REDUCE THE IMPACTS** of wildfire, the Forest Service and Western politicians harp on the importance of increasing logging and controlled burning. But some environmentalists and ecologists—particularly those that prioritize a hands-off approach to forest management—argue that aggressive thinning has little potential to change fire behaviour. "You just can't do it on enough of the landscape to make a big-enough difference," said Dominick DellaSala, the chief scientist for the environmental non-profit Earth Island Institute's Wild Heritage program, which focuses on forest protection. "And even if you could, it only will work under low to moderate fire weather."

Thinning can also make fires worse and even damage ecosystems, he added. Wind speeds can increase in thinned stands, driving fires even farther and faster, and logging-access roads damage wildlife habitat through erosion. Those same roads also make it easier for people to go out and start fires—more than 80 per cent of wildfires are sparked by humans.

DellaSala has seen firsthand how out-of-control fires can destroy communities. Last September, the Almeda Fire ripped through his hometown of Talent, Ore.; it killed three people and levelled

thousands of homes. With that in mind, he thinks fire protection should start in backyards rather than the backwoods, and be small and targeted rather than forest-wide. “We can be surgical about how we treat the landscape, go to the places that are closest to the homes and work from the home out,” he said.

While opinions differ on the impact of thinning, ecologists and forest managers generally agree that prescribed fires can help reduce the likelihood of megafires. Intentional burning by Indigenous nations shaped Western forests for millennia. The genocide and dispossession of Indigenous people by European colonizers disrupted the links between humans, fires and forests. Programs like the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network are working to repair those relationships and return cultural fire to the landscape by building partnerships between Indigenous fire practitioners and the government employees responsible for controlled burns.

The Indigenous Peoples Burning Network is not yet active in Idaho, but tribal agencies in the state are working to get more fire on the ground, including in partnership with the Forest Service. “Prescribed burning is something that we do as much as we can,” said Jeff Handel, who leads the Nez Perce Tribe’s fire-management program. Handel also participates in the Idaho Prescribed Fire Council, a group of tribal, federal and state governmental and agency representatives, as well as private citizens, created in late 2020 to promote planned fires and share resources. Tribal and federal agencies already partner on putting out wildfires, Handel explained, so it makes sense for them to work together on prescribed fires. “We fight fires that way,” he said. “I think we should also do our forest planning and burning that way.”

**DRIVING INTO SALMON** from the north, you emerge from steep-walled forests into a rolling valley bottom. In April, wobbly calves stood next to their mothers in a pasture at the edge of town, beneath a Confederate flag. An hour south in Challis, a large billboard depicting blackened trees against a red backdrop blamed devastating wildfires on people who oppose logging: “Environmentalists... you own this! Log it, graze it, or burn it!” Both counties are overwhelmingly white and Republican.

At a picnic table at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 93 in Challis, Dolores Ivie, a former administrator for the local power company, schoolteacher and 2019 inductee into the Idaho Republican Party Hall of Fame, ran through a litany of frustrations with how Forest Service officials and D.C. politicians have managed the Salmon-Challis. Ivie, along with many in the area, felt like the Forest Service wasn’t serving their needs; instead, it was reintroducing wolves, expanding wilderness and working too closely with a local conservation organization. “People want use of their federal lands,” she said, for jobs, firewood, recreation and grazing. And they want to feel like the Forest Service is listening to them, she added.

As we sat under the bright but chilly spring sun, Ivie wore sunglasses over readers and smoked Basic brand cigarettes, neatly tucking the butts back into the pack after extinguishing them. Ivie coordinates a citizens’ group called the Lemhi-Custer Grassroots Advisory, or the LCGA, created to amplify local concerns over how the Forest Service is managing the land. She was chosen to lead it for a simple reason: “I have organizational skills that scare most people,” Ivie said, cracking a wry grin.

The LCGA formed as a counterpoint to two other Salmon-Challis stakeholder groups. Both are what’s called a forest collaborative: an association of people with diverse interests in a particular forest who debate issues like wildfire risk and habitat restoration, then offer their advice to Forest Service managers. Forest collaboratives rose to prominence in the 2000s and 2010s as a way to involve communities in federal land management, though they’re not led by the Forest Service—instead, a group such as an environmental organization typically convenes them—and they lack official decision-making authority. Still, the agency generally looks to these groups to help develop plans and build awareness and consensus around upcoming projects. There are two Salmon-Challis collaboratives: the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group, which helped plan the fuel treatments that were effective during the Mustang Fire, and the Central Idaho Public Lands Collaborative. Both groups are facilitated by Salmon Valley Stewardship, the local conservation organization whose influence chafed at Ivie.

The catalyzing moment for the LCGA's creation came at a public meeting in 2017, when a Forest Service staffer, who is also the former head of Salmon Valley Stewardship, was presenting proposals for revisions to the Salmon-Challis forest plan. Forest plans are influential, detailed documents: They guide all of the agency's decisions on a given national forest. But when one member of the public asked a question, Ivie recalled, the staffer "basically told her to sit down and be quiet; they didn't want to hear from a bunch of 'angry villagers.'" Today, Ivie's SUV and other local rigs sport yellow stickers with black lettering declaring themselves Angry Villagers. After years of feeling unrepresented on decisions that impact their community, "that was the icing on the cake," Ivie said. "That's what started the LCGA."

Federal land planners often cite collaboration and public participation as fundamental to effective management. But there's no set model for how collaboratives function or who gets to participate in them—no framework to balance interests and ensure that a truly diverse range of viewpoints is represented. Members of the LCGA felt left out; they see the collaboratives as more accessible to environmental professionals, who, after all, get paid to sit in long meetings about forest policies. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, environmentalist critics, like author and activist George Wuerthner, have argued that collaboratives are a waste of time that benefit industry at the expense of wildlife and land protection.

Today, the LCGA has more than 300 members, Ivie said, who favour more economic activity and fewer protective land designations. They've organized public-comment submissions, rallied people to public meetings, been active in the op-ed pages of local newspapers, met with their representatives in Congress and aired grievances to the Forest Service.

The relationship between the group and the agency has improved since the heated meeting in 2017. "We've had input into some issues that have changed their minds," Ivie said, including a large logging project meant to reduce wildfire risk. They also spoke up about the pair of categorical exclusions Mark proposed late last year, the wide-ranging plans to increase thinning and burning on the Salmon-Challis. LCGA members criticized the agency for presenting sprawling plans with so few details, and not including more opportunities for commercial cutting; they'd rather see trees logged than burned. "Resource use is a high priority for the two communities," Ivie said. "That's what we survive on."

**TIMBER MANAGEMENT** is foundational to the Forest Service. When the federal government created the agency in 1905, it was supposed to prevent wholesale clear-cutting and conserve forests for future generations. But the agency disregarded the knowledge of the Indigenous peoples who had stewarded and shaped the landscape for thousands of years. Instead, it focused on what agency leaders and politicians considered sustainable harvesting.

Most logging on national forests happens through timber sales: The Forest Service outlines where and what kind of cutting it wants done, then private companies bid for the chance to harvest the trees. As part of the process, the Forest Service often offers large, fire-resistant trees—which are more valuable because of their size and tight grain—as an incentive for companies to bid on the thinning that, in many cases, is a sale's true objective. "Something's got to carry the load," Mark said. "Otherwise, you're not going to be able to sell the sale and you won't get anything done."

Sometimes, however, the agency can sidestep this economic model. Unprofitable timberwork on the Salmon-Challis is done through partnerships with the Idaho and Montana conservation corps. These work programs channel the spirit of the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps—nicknamed "Roosevelt's Tree Army"—which, in the 1930s, employed millions of workers who planted billions of trees. Mark doesn't think today's programs are large enough to make a difference on a landscape scale. But the Biden administration's American Jobs Plan, which proposes a \$10-billion investment in a 21st-century twist on the CCC called the Civilian Climate Corps, could help scale up similar forest-thinning efforts.

Today, annual timber harvests on Forest Service land are less than a quarter of what they were in the 1980s, in part, at least in the Northwest, because of endangered species protections for spotted owls. In towns like Salmon and Challis, the decline of public-land logging has left a shell of a local timber economy as large mills closed and hundreds of local timber jobs dwindled to just a handful.

One of the few timbermen still making a living logging on the Salmon-Challis is Joe Frauenberger, a Challis local who started his own company, Twin Peaks Timber, in 2017. It's a small outfit, with just two employees, and it isn't geared toward the kind of large-scale logging that occurs in places with an active commercial timber industry, like the Cascades in Oregon, where clear-cuts might cover hundreds or thousands of acres. Frauenberger only has the capacity to cut about a couple hundred acres per year.

And unlike big companies, which send their wood to mills to be turned into lumber, Twin Peaks mainly sells logs for use in local wood stoves. In Lemhi and Custer counties, about a third of households depend on firewood as their main source of heat. Twin Peaks Timber also provides logs and stumps for habitat restoration projects, and does tree-trimming work and other odd jobs around town that require heavy machinery.

Frauenberger said his relationship with the Forest Service has helped his business get all the timber it needs, though it doesn't hurt that he's the only show in town and there's no competition for the small sales he's buying. But Mark doesn't think there's enough local capacity to do the kind of large-scale projects he sees as necessary to reduce fire risk and protect the towns on the edge of the forest—hence the two huge categorical exclusions he proposed in late 2020.

**AFTER YEARS OF FRUSTRATION** with the Forest Service and each other, members of environmental organizations, the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group collaborative and Ivie's group, the LCGA, found something to agree on: No one liked the categorical exclusions Mark had proposed for the Salmon-Challis. "Both sides disagree on a lot," said Josh Johnson, who participates in the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group as a staffer for the Idaho Conservation League, an environmental non-profit. "Where we agree is that the Forest Service hasn't done the best job at public involvement."

Environmental groups argued that the projects would indeed have significant environmental impacts and called for a more in-depth planning process. Members of the Lemhi Forest Restoration Group balked at the assertion, in planning documents, that they'd approved of the project—they hadn't. The LCGA complained that the plans were a pet project of environmentalists and didn't include enough logging. All sides agreed that more details were needed to assess the impacts and justifications for the proposals. They wanted to know where projects would occur, and how and when they would be carried out. In short, they felt like Mark was going about this the wrong way. "Get the input from the beginning," Ivie said; to her, the solution seemed obvious. "Don't come out with a decision and then get clobbered by it."

After receiving that community feedback—and seeing other national forests get sued for similar landscape-level categorical exclusions—Mark put a pause on the proposals. "Some people are uncomfortable, and I knew that coming in," he said. "But I guarantee you get another (fire) that's threatening this ridge with a smoke cloud that's 30,000 feet in the air, I know you're going to be uncomfortable." At the end of the day, Mark's priority is not how the thinning and prescribed fire treatments are planned, it's figuring out ways to make sure that they're actually getting done.

Meanwhile, as Mark decides what to do next—whether to pursue the categorical exclusions or do a more extensive environmental assessment—smaller projects are already underway. This spring and summer, a commercial timber company is logging 872 acres (353 ha.) and shipping the logs 200 miles (322 kilometres) north for milling. It's the largest sale in the area in years, and one that will thin the forest to put firebreaks between the millions of acres of backcountry and the town of Salmon in the valley below. For that project, the Forest Service did sit down with the LCGA to hash out details, giving Ivie the sense that the agency was getting better at involving the community. "I don't think it matters how you get there, but that you get there, and you start waking up to why people feel the way that they feel," Ivie told me. "That's kind of where we are right now, taking steps in that direction. They're baby steps, but they're in the right direction."

In April, after Mark showed me the trees above Salmon that are bound to burn sooner or later, we wound back down the canyon. There, on the side of the ridge facing Salmon, firefighters stand a better chance of stopping a fire threatening the town, because flames are more likely to die down as they move downslope. As the SUV ground over gravel and through spring snowmelt, we passed signs

marking the bounds of the logging project. The trees that will be cut were ringed with a line of blue spray paint.

The next time a fire starts in the forest, firefighters will likely be positioned among the remaining trees, waiting to fight the flames. "We're trying to be strategic about it," Mark explained, by focusing on the most advantageous places for firefighters to take a stand against a blaze. "Then we might get the opportunity to at least slow it down, and maybe, in places, stop it," Mark said. "But there's no guarantees."

Source: <https://www.piquenewsmagazine.com/cover-stories/facing-future-wildfires-a-community-fights-for-its-forest-4746184>