

CONTROLLED BURNS and the DEATH of a GOOD BOXER

An Environmental Column for El Seminario by Kurt Aronow August 5, 1996

*And all through the gloom of that long afternoon,
the fire fed and grew stronger.
Driven by the wind it danced along the mountain rim,
roaring out its anger.*

*For twenty years, our land we cleared,
we plowed, and we sowed, and we tamed it.
But where the bushfire has passed, there's only black ash,
and nature has reclaimed it.
(from *Bushfire* by Eric Bogle)*

Al Salazar had a big heart. The eldest son of immigrants from Mexico and its Revolution, he helped raise his brothers and his family by working in the fields when he was young. A mechanic and a builder by nature, he found his way in Lakewood as a young man. He volunteered during WWII; among other things, he was the lightweight U.S. Army boxing champion for several years. After the war, he became the head of a household that took in dozens of young people over the years that were kin or friends of the family. He helped raise them and taught them skills in construction and about the moral value of work. Although he was not stout, everyone knew of his great strength and his big heart.

Al had a cabin along the South Platte River near Buffalo Creek. He'd been rebuilding it for over thirty years. This particular building project was his escape from the thousand other projects he tended in the city. The night last July when the Rockies scored thirteen runs in one inning between a break in the rain, Al was asleep in his trailer by the river with his dog curled up almost on top of him. When the sheriffs found him the next day, he had been carried miles away by a wall of water that had swept down the South Platte. They couldn't distinguish whether he was in a car and a trailer. His brothers said he died the death of a warrior.

Rhetorical questions about the forest and the river near Al's cabin remain. If the Buffalo Creek fire hadn't happened, would there have been enough undergrowth to contain the flash flood that swept away Al's trailer?

Ironically, the managers of the Pike National Forest had just started a controlled burn program in the South Platte Ranger District around Buffalo Creek before the big fire. They had already burned the undergrowth on about 500 acres of a parcel immediately adjoining the area burned in the Buffalo Creek fire. Before they could do controlled burns around Buffalo Creek, the area burned to the ground taking several campgrounds, a firehouse, and a lot of healthy, mature trees.

If a controlled burn program had been in place over the years, the devastating Buffalo Creek fire *might* not have happened because there wouldn't have been enough fuel to allow it to burn so hot. . . .

The Forest Service has known for years that Smokey the Bear was wrong. If you put out every fire, then the undergrowth will grow thicker and thicker. Eventually, a fire occurs and burns everything in its path. Many pine forests depend on fire to germinate its seeds and to provide enough sunlight to allow the seedlings to come up. But if the fire burns too hot, everything could be destroyed including homes in private inholdings. The soil could erode before new trees can grow.

Recent examples abound. A fire above Oakland in an area long-devoid of burns destroyed tens of millions of dollars of property. The Yellowstone fire a few years ago destroyed too many healthy trees. The fire at Storm King above Glenwood Springs killed several firefighting warriors because it burned so hot so fast. The Denver Post reported last week that in light of the events at Storm King, the Forest Service was evaluating at a national level its put-out-all-fires policy.

All of this makes one realize how silly the Salvage Logging Rider passed last year really is. This rider was attached to an otherwise-unrelated bill. It suspends all environmental laws applying to logging in forests that have suffered "damage" due to fires, etc. The special interests sold Clinton this bill of lies by assuring him that it would promote the health of the forests and help prevent forest fires. Specifically, the logging companies wanted to get their chainsaws into the last roadless areas holding the last of America's old growth forests. That these areas should need man's intervention to "save" them after over 10,000 years of existence (since the last ice age) is beyond credibility.

So if the Forest Service does a controlled burn to allow the forest to flourish as a whole (and to reduce the overall fire danger), can that area then be salvage logged?

Shortly after the Rider's passage, the timber industry's lawyers went to court seeking old-growth timber that even the federal agencies didn't want to sell. The lawyers said that it didn't matter if the logging caused landslides and flooding, polluted water supplies, or drove salmon and other species into extinction--these effects were "irrelevant." (It is useful to remember that one of the primary reasons for the creation of National Forests in the first place is the protection of watersheds such as the South Platte.)

The Rider led to various court rulings that have resurrected greater than 140 of the most ecologically catastrophic timber sales. These sales involve about 582 million board feet of timber and 33,000 acres of Northwest lands. Some Colorado lands are involved as well. The logging companies will need 116,400 logging trucks to haul away the wood from these sales. If the trucks were placed end to end, they would extend from Seattle to Albuquerque.

Republicans, including Bob Dole, still seek to renew the Salvage Logging Rider. Many of our ancient forests have already been destroyed. What we need is a realistic policy regarding controlled burns in our National Forests. Clearcutting our watersheds will just lead to more flash floods like at Buffalo Creek. Even Al Salazar wasn't strong enough to save himself from the power of that flood.

Here's what you can do:

Write to the folks below and tell them you oppose any bill that includes an extension to the salvage logging rider. Tell them that you support moves within the Forest Service to institute controlled burn policies.

Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell
380 Russell Building
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-5852

Senator Hank Brown
717 Hart Building
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-5941
senator_brown@brown.senate.gov

President Bill Clinton
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-1414
president@whitehouse.gov

Representative Pat Shroeder
2208 Rayburn Building
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-4431