

STEWARD OF A SCORCHED EARTH

PEGGY HERNANDEZ CHANGES WITH THE SEASONS

BY SCOTT ROARK

IMAGINE A LINE OF FLAMES SEVERAL MILES long roaring swiftly up mountains and down valleys, incinerating an area more than five times the size of the District of Columbia. The fiery wave leaves behind a quiet landscape of charred brush, trees and horizons.

Peggy Hernandez (NRM '82), the newly appointed supervisor of the Los Padres National Forest, surveys the landscape once blackened by the Zaca Fire, the second largest in California's recorded history. Fire season is now officially over. January rains have saturated the burn area more than five months after the inferno was contained. Most of the 240,000 affected acres were in the Los Padres National Forest.

"This fire was a devastating event, but in some ways a blessing since this is such a remote area," said Hernandez as she eyes a once-blackened hillside. Fire can be a natural management tool for cleaning out dead vegetation and debris. For a typical wildfire, the main challenge is recovery – the landscape needs time to heal.

Overseeing fire recovery is just one of many supervisor duties for Hernandez, a California native and first-generation college graduate. She is responsible for the operations of the entire 1.76-million acre Los Padres National Forest, extending approximately 220 miles from Big Sur to the Ventura/Los Angeles county line. She oversees a staff of nearly 500 and a \$20-million budget.

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The smoldering aftermath of the Zaca Fire, the second largest in California's history.
(Photo by Ray Ford)



Peggy Hernandez

Hernandez grew up in Visalia and realized early on what she wanted to do. “I love being outdoors and enjoy getting dirty,” she said with a smile.

She came to Cal Poly through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which provided a “critical support network,” ac-

the Senior Executive Fellow Leadership program at Harvard.

Hernandez is using those leadership skills in her new position, working closely with federal, state and local officials on Forest Service priorities such as managing effects of climate change and environmental education for children. Of course, the omnipresent threat of wildfires, and the aftermath, requires a constant state of readiness.

According to Hernandez, a significant problem after a wildfire is stabilizing hillsides and controlling sediment runoff before it runs into nearby creeks and reservoirs. On moderate slopes, especially near development, a process called hydro-mulching is used to seed and stabilize the hillsides.

In the case of the Zaca Fire, rehabilitation efforts are a significant challenge because of the steepness of the slope and remoteness of the area. In addition, Forest Service officials believe much of the land will recover on its own over the years, since the chaparral ecosystems are fire-adapted.

Post-fire recovery efforts tie directly into another priority for Hernandez as forest supervisor – managing development on the borders of public land. According to Hernandez, these two areas significantly impact each other, sometimes with devastating results, which is what happened during the recent fires in Southern California. Development continues to push into wild land areas at high risk of wildfires.

As Hernandez settles into her new position, once an unimaginable responsibility to that apprehensive student who was the first in her family to go to college, she fondly remem-

IN THE CASE OF THE ZACA FIRE, REHABILITATION EFFORTS ARE A SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGE BECAUSE OF THE STEEPNESS OF THE SLOPE AND REMOTENESS OF THE AREA

bering the sense of camaraderie among EOP students. “I was very fortunate to be in that program – it was such an important part of my life on campus,” she said.

Hernandez strongly encourages other first-generation students to pursue their academic and professional goals. “First, always remember that you can do this. The only person standing in your way is yourself,” she said. “When things get tough, find someone to talk to. You might feel you’re the only one in your situation, but believe me, there are many others. You’re not alone.” □

After graduating, Hernandez landed her first position as a harvest inspector with the U.S. Forest Service. She quickly moved up the ranks, playing active roles in fire and recreation programs. In early 2000, Hernandez served as a Congressional Fellow on Capitol Hill for the Forest Service and completed

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