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## U.S. Forest Service Chief Outlines Future Fire Ecology Needs

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- The "mega fires" that seem to regularly ravage California and the rest of the country are a huge and growing threat. How did they originate and can anything be done?

These questions were addressed by U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth, on campus recently as part of the Fire Ecology and Management seminar series.

Three main factors have created this dangerous phenomenon, Chief Boswell believes:

- the old policy of fire exclusion, which created dense forests and thick undergrowth
- changing demographic and social patterns, which result in more homes and buildings near forested areas
- climatic changes, such as increasing drought in the Western states, that has turned once-robust forests into "explosive fuel."

In fact, since 2000, five states have had the largest fires in their recorded histories, he said.

The irony in this situation, Boswell pointed out, is that the United States has "the most effective fire-fighting organization in the world." But even the best-trained fire fighters and the best equipment can't cope with the stresses of a growing population and global warming.

Given the complexity of the issue, where should the Forest Service focus be? First, Boswell recommends a larger public policy debate to weigh the issues and examine the trade-offs.

"Americans want to live in the woods, but they don't want them managed," he said. They want "cheap two-by-fours and plenty of printer paper," but resist prescribed burns, selective logging, and other "treatments" for preventing wildfires.

Boswell suggests several solutions to be considered as part of this public dialog:

- Buying more conservation easements
- Providing economic incentives to private land owners to help them keep their lands undeveloped, to increase "carbon sequestering" and wildlife habitat
- Working with insurance companies to help educate homeowners
- Bringing more natural resource specialists and other scientists into the debate, to help the U.S. understand the consequences of climate change, and to conduct studies on the best ways to restore fire-damaged areas.

In fact, the NSF itself is going to need new personnel to replace its workforce, with 50 percent of its employees eligible for retirement in the next five years. "We'll be looking for employees with good people skills and the ability to collaborate with the public," he said.

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