

# Resiliency project risky to communities

By Dominick A. DellaSala (As published in the “Santa Fe New Mexican”)

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Santa Fe is enveloped by majestic forests where no road or chain saw has gone before. Roadless areas and those with few roads are wellsprings of the region’s quality of life, anchoring soils, providing clean air and drinking water for downstream users, and solitude for wildlife and people alike. The region’s thriving tourism economy is rooted in its untrammelled landscapes.

For millennia, the occasional wildfire, set by lightning or Native peoples for ecosystem and cultural benefits, created a patchwork mosaic of burn intensities where wildlife of all fire tolerances thrived. Most flames swept through the understory, clearing shrubs and small trees, while not intense enough to kill the largest trees. Occasionally, during drought cycles or in the higher elevations, fire would flare up, killing most of the trees in an area and creating a charcoal forest teeming with fire-dependent plants and animals. This dance between burned and unburned areas may seem like a catastrophe, but in reality, it is nature’s phoenix as the new forest literally rises from the ashes.

But how do we live safely with fire in a hotter climate when some 2,000 homes are pressed against the edge of forests and grasslands born to burn?

Unfortunately, coexistence with fire is not on the minds of the U.S. Forest Service, which is poised to open some 94 miles of primitive roads in the Santa Fe National Forest to clear trees from thousands of acres of pine and spruce-fir forests in the name of fire risk reduction. Experience from fire-prone communities around the West and a growing consensus among scientists is teaching us that there are better ways to balance community fire safety with the inevitability of a wildfire (“Cut and burn our forest? Please provide comment,” My View, July 7).

It begins at the home with the collective actions of neighbors being proactive and strategic.

Recent studies from thousands of wildfires in the West have shown that the chance of a lightning strike encountering a forest when the vegetation has been thinned is less than one in 100. But if neighbors focus on proven defensible space measures by clearing flammable vegetation nearest the home, screening gutters and vents and building with fire-resistant materials — the odds of getting through a fire go way up, to at least 95 in 100. Working from the home outward is a proven strategy to reduce fire risks developed by Forest Service researchers.

No amount of thinning or road improvements in the backcountry improve the odds of home safety, especially as fires become bigger and more frequent in places because of global heating. And we all need to do our part in lessening climate change by keeping dinosaur carbon in the ground and atmospheric carbon in the forests by not cutting them down.

Improving primitive roads comes with inherent risks. Scientists discovered that some eight out of 10 wildfires nationwide were set accidentally or by arsonists — the odds go way up with more roads and development in an area. Instead of improving roads, the

Forest Service should be dismantling and closing more of them to prevent unnatural ignitions.

Obliterating roads — especially those polluting clean water near roadless areas — would create a natural buffer to the Pecos Wilderness while simultaneously lowering fire risks to communities. A recent study of some 1,500 wildfires across 11 Western states, including New Mexico, found that wilderness areas, parks and roadless areas actually burned in lower fire intensities compared to heavily logged and roaded areas. This is because logging slash and densely packed small trees in logged-over lands act like fire's gasoline.

Nature's phoenix cannot be tamed by aggressive clearing or road improvements. And firefighters and communities cannot be made safe by thinning in this new era of extreme fire weather. Instead, we need to adapt to wildfires by putting the odds in our favor. The Forest Service does the community an injustice by misdirecting limited public funds at backcountry forest clearing with no chance of protecting homes. There is still time to change direction by focusing on homes and community fire protection.

*Dominick A. DellaSala, Ph.D., is an award-winning scientist with over 200 scientific publications and books including The Ecological Importance of Mixed-Severity Fire: Nature's Phoenix (Elsevier). He lives in Oregon.*

