



Research Brief for Resource Managers

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Light Burning is “Piute Forestry” by Another Name

Greeley, W.B. 1920. “Piute Forestry” or the fallacy of light burning. *The Timberman* 21(5): 38-39.

William Greeley, who became chief of the US Forest Service in 1920, represented the official policy of the USFS with his strong stance against repeated “light burning” in forests. Certainly, he had timber owners, municipal agencies and the majority of the American public on his side of the debate, so he was not shy to argue that “light burning” was just “Piute Forestry,” primitive, impossible to control and a destructive path to valueless shrubland. In Greeley’s eyes, burning advocates were recklessly destroying the country’s “merchantable stumpage” with repeated ground fires, slowly eating away at the forest and insidiously causing more damage than any random conflagration could cause.

The evidence for Mr. Greeley’s claims comes from his observation that roughly 20 successful years of organized fire suppression allowed the “unnaturally desolate” shrublands and open forests of California to grow again. In his mind, fire-thinned forests were actually in a state of decline: “Every time a fire runs over these areas a few more old trees are hollowed out at the base so that the next high wind topples them over, a few more fine logs become infected with rot through surface scars, and more of the young growth by which nature constantly seeks to recover lost ground is crowded out by brush.” Greeley also claimed that chaparral was once forested, but because of long-term “Piute Forestry”, those areas

Management Implications

- Greeley argued that systematically repeated ground fires, every 3 or 4 years, were more damaging over time than the occasional conflagration.
- He believed that human applied, frequent fire created the unfortunate shrubland and open forest conditions of California. These were viewed as unnaturally unproductive lands in need of fire protection to re-grow.
- Greeley points to 20 years of organized fire protection and the resulting crop of young trees filling those previously desolate lands as support for his arguments.

are now totally treeless, representing about 37 billion feet of lost timber.

Mr. Greeley metaphorically concluded: “We should no more permit an essentially destructive theory, like that of light burning, to nullify our efforts at real forest protection than we would permit the advertisement of sure cures for tuberculosis to do away with the sanitary regulations of cities, the tuberculosis sanatoria, fresh air for patients, and the other means employed by medical and hygienic sciences for combating the white plague.” Because managing for board feet was the primary goal of the USFS in 1920, fire suppression was viewed as the only reasonable choice.