

# THIS PROFESSION WE CALL LOGGING

*Lorrie Woods, ALP Coordinator*

*A breathe of fresh air!* Literally! The rain smells so good!

As Montana loggers return to a more “normal” routine, I suspect you—like me—are finding yourself engaged in some rather interesting conversations about how wildfire fits—or has been forced—into our lives. I find myself talking about it every day.

As a professional forester I understand that we live in, and are part of a fire based eco-system. I understand that... but I also say whoa! As this article was written, Montana has active fires on 600,000 acres... and once the snow flies, we will know the total acres blackened in 2017.

We have lived with *bad air* off and on for months... businesses have been disrupted or stopped—especially those associated with the wood products and our recreational industries.

Many of our friends and neighbors have been evacuated... and some have lost their homes.

Two firefighters have lost their lives on fire lines this summer... and we don't know how many have been injured.

I can't imagine anyone living in, or visiting, Montana this summer has not suffered the consequences of this year's wildfire season... especially MLA members!

Fire plays an important role in our ecosystem, producing a disturbance in the forest. Not necessarily good or bad, just a disturbance. The disturbance often resets the clock for fauna and flora. There have always been fires in the Northern Rockies... and mankind has had a hand in it for centuries.

Since the early 1900's, our direction *was* to suppress wildfires in order to protect life and property and to limit the size of fires.

Today, wildfire management has adapted to allow for fire in wilderness areas... and to reintroduce fire into our landscape at a level that is more or less acceptable to the public. But our history of fire suppression and lack of other disturbance has already made a mark. Our ecosystem now has too many acres of “fuel ladders” carrying fire from the ground to the crowns. Mother Nature is simply responding to our past actions.

So, if I understand our fire-based ecosystem and man's role in it, what is my problem?

I don't like the *AMOUNT* of black we now have... nor the smoke... nor the waste (dollars and resources)... nor the hazards it poses... and the loss of life is a *tragedy*.

I worry about our forests—and all the animals and plants thereof.

I worry about water quality and fish habitat... especially those in critical SMZ's that we all work so hard to protect.

I worry about the negative impacts wildfires mean for erosion, soils and noxious weed outbreaks.

I worry about *my life style*: Will my favorite trail be open? The footbridge intact? Elk in their traditional winter ground? And did my wood house burn? Yes, I am just as selfish as everyone else!

Do I want fires to burn (disturb) uncontrolled across the landscape as they did this year? No.

Do I want fire (disturbance) to go away? No, I don't think that is realistic, or ecologically sound.

Disturbance is going to happen... so how should we respond? Can we provide the disturbance that would otherwise be caused by large wildfires? [You know the answer!]

Forest management can provide disturbance in a controlled and environmentally sound manner. Forest Management should mimic nature, accounting for ecological and public values. We know how to do this!

To be clear, I'm not saying that we need to replicate all fire through forest management, nor that every acre needs to be disturbed. I am advocating that as a society who enjoys the benefits of a healthy forest, clean water, recreation, wildlife and wood products we—working smartly—can achieve and maintain a very rich environment to live and prosper in... and, importantly, pass on to future generations

As professional loggers, you have the opportunity—and, I might add—an obligation to ensure that Montana's forests provide generations of resource values throughout your careers. After all, we all just want the basics—clean air, clean water, a healthy environment and a roof over our heads. Don't make it any more complicated than that.

You spend your professional life implementing forest management—harvesting trees, protecting water quality, soils and wildlife, and creating a sustainable forest. You provide a “planned disturbance” but still pitch in and fight fire when we are faced with the “unplanned disturbance”! You hunt, fish, hike and generally enjoy the environment around us. You deserve public recognition and support. You are part of the solution! **LW**