

INTERVIEWS WITH FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERTS

# ARE WILDFIRES GETTING MORE EXTREME?

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WE ASKED A  
GROUP OF FIRE  
BEHAVIOR  
EXPERTS



IN THEIR OPINION, IT'S NOT FIRE BEHAVIOR THAT IS CHANGING  
FINDINGS



“Fuels have changed and the intensities of fires that we’re seeing are changing. The size of the fires have changed. Fire behavior, the basics are all still the same. There’s nothing new that’s going on out there on the ground. It’s how we react to it as much as anything.”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“[Fire changed] in the late '80s, some years ... some years kept trying to change back. And then after the '90s, it started just getting drier and drier. It was a good progression...We've seen 1,000 hour fuel moistures now that are single digits all season long and these are very dry fuels”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“We’re seeing higher intensities now and we’re seeing larger areas burn and I can attribute some of that to the fact that the stand flammability is changing in some of our ecosystems.”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“I think that in the past, I think maybe something else that caused a shift is that fires were suppressed and decisions were more imposing our will on fires as opposed to understanding what they were going to do.

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“[Fires ] ...have a greater availability of fuels to grow larger early and through subsequent periods and also continue large acreage gains in the thermal belt and overnight. I've been on many of those fires that just continue to put on large acreage gains during the daytime and almost as big of gains at night as well. So and it gets well beyond the capacity for perimeter control, I guess. Once it's got that footprint on the hillside, it's more [of a] long duration [fire].”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT



THEIR RESPONSE TO  
STATEMENTS LIKE:

“I’VE NEVER  
SEEN FIRE DO  
THAT BEFORE”



But I've always been one when I see things like *unprecedented fire behavior* and that word may be rhetorically correct. Fire behavior that [was] totally unexpected. That's the term you always hear and that one has always hit me like fingernails on a chalkboard. It's like no, it's not unexpected. That's exactly how that fuel profile on that piece of ground with that atmosphere over it is going to behave. It's not unexpected at all.

-FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

Yeah. I can't think of any fire anywhere that really was unexpected at all...I worked with MTDC on fatalities and entrapments and fire-caused sheltered deployments, that thing. And it's like you keep thinking that these crews, these people were surprised or they couldn't have predicted the fire behavior but I couldn't find any of them...you can predict it, you can see it coming, but people either got in the way of things that they shouldn't have or their egos got in the way

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

I think what's putting people back on their heels and making them reel is that with the overall change in fuels and overlaying that with a changing weather scenario, things are starting quicker and the fire behavior is progressing rapidly and fires are getting larger quickly so the things you used to see on a little slower scale are just happening boom-boom-boom. And I think that's probably playing into those statements strongly.

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

NOT A FIRE BEHAVIOR PROBLEM

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH FIRE?



If you read the National Cohesive Strategy, it talks about learning to live with fire in there. And I wish we could do that as a country, because we're not there now. We still wage war on fire. And I don't know if we can win that. ...if we can learn to live with fire and manage fire and accept some short-term gains for long-term benefits...and if you subscribe to the theory that we don't have a fire problem, we have a land use problem. If we can fix that, then the fire problem or fire situation will change quite a bit.

-FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

NEEDED IN THE FUTURE:

MORE FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERTS



I think they're going to be faced with more of the same. I think we're going to need a lot more of them [fire behavior experts]. I don't believe we have enough people now who are capable of providing that information. And without people to provide that information, you have to make decisions that are not based on the best available information.

-FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT



WHAT DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

# CHANGING STRATEGY



“there's just continually people moving out there in the neck of the woods and it's been a concern, a problem for years educating people and defensible space and all that stuff, but people are just stretching their elbows out and moving out in to these places and so there's going to be more houses burning up and towns threatened and that kind of thing is again it's going to be everybody's turn it's just a matter of when.”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“I think if we really want to protect our natural resources and life and property in the wildland urban interface it just can’t be a donut strategy around homes. You’ve got to go out into the adjacent forest and change that fuel regimes and create mosaics where you can.”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

“The best way to say this...nobody should be surprised today when there’s a lot of homes lost. We know that under certain fuels, weather, and topography that different vegetation complexes are going to burn. And it’s gonna be very impressive when homes burn with that. But by making statements that stuff’s burning like I have never seen before could lead the public to believe that it is not something that should be expected, because it should be expected. Not only should it be expected, but it should be acceptable that that’s going to be the outcome.”

FIRE BEHAVIOR EXPERT

# THANKS!

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