

Land, Water and People

By Paul Minow

Charcoal in the Forest

As we hear in the news about climate change and droughts and big fires, one might ask, “is this really something new or have there been dry periods with big fires like this in the past?” We can leave the big question of human-caused climate change for the scientists to resolve, but we know for sure there have been periods of drought and big fires in the past.

The reasons for these large fires come from many possible sources: American Indians started some to move game or improve forage; sheepmen set fires to improve forage; there were numerous fires along the railroad tracks; and miners were thought to have set many fires as they were leaving the area during the silver panic of 1893.

The landscape of the Rio Grande National Forest reveals that large fires have had a strong influence on the make up of the ecosystem. Many of the large expanses of mature aspen that are on the forest now can be attributed to past fires. In 1903, it was estimated that 12 percent of the area in the proposed San Juan Forest Reserve, which included parts of the Rio Grande NF, was vegetated in aspen.

Not all fires led to aspen stands. Several fires have left the forest treeless and converted to rangelands. In 1879, the Osier mountain fire burned about 30,000 acres on the Conejos Peak Ranger District and to this day at least 50 percent of the area is still grass with a few fire-hardened snags standing or lying on the ground. Part of the Osier mountain fire was on the Pinorealosa ridge, which was so named for its great stand of spruce forest before the fire.

In the past 30 to 40 years, there have been periods where the landscape has been impacted by fire, but certainly not to the level that occurred in the 1800’s. Most recently, in 2002, the Million fire altered the forests around South Fork. Most people may look at the aftermath and see only the charred trees and gullies that have washed due to the rain on the burn area, but actually this is a good opportunity to watch how the landscape can heal itself and become productive forests and rangelands again.

Next time you walk through the woods, take a good look at the ground or the surrounding trees to see if any of them have charcoal on them. Most of the fires that occur on the forest are not very big. Sometimes only a single tree is partly charred and wasn’t even killed or it could be burned to where only the stump hole and a few limbs are left behind. All this contributes to creating a diversity of vegetation on the landscape that helps to support the diversity of wildlife.

Paul Minow is the Fire Management Officer for Conejos Peak Ranger District. He has worked for the Rio Grande National Forest since 1986 and has fought wildland fires throughout the West.