

COLUMN SUBMISSION

USDA Forest Service

Kaibab National Forest
Williams Ranger District

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Do You Want To Be Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

There is an interesting phenomenon I've noticed in all aspects of life. That is the propensity of people to think that they are somehow different than everyone else – an exception to the rule. I understand that. Whose parents didn't tell them that they were special!

With the recent forest closures, I've noticed that the uniqueness phenomenon spills over into our attitudes about generalized rules, such as the blanket restriction on access into the forest. Even I have wondered why I – a Forest Service employee and a trained wildland firefighter no less – have been banished from my favorite trails through the forest near my home. Shouldn't I have special privileges?

I am an avid hiker and camper; I don't smoke; I don't leave campfires unattended; I don't leave my campsite without ensuring my fire is out – “dead out.” So why can't I continue to enjoy the forest?

I'm one of those people who doesn't even have a campfire in the middle of winter with an inch of snow on the ground. Why? I'll be honest. I'm paranoid. I can picture a million scenarios in which my photo ends up on the front page of the newspaper next to the headline: “Fire Information Officer Starts Blaze; Must Not Know Much About Fire.”

The story would describe how a tiny piece of burning debris from my campfire managed to float into the air, land on a bird's wing, get carried north about 60 miles, fall into the big ditch, and burn down one of Mother Nature's most impressive natural wonders. (Impossible I know, but paranoia knows no logic.) My point? I'd rather be safe than sorry, even if my husband thinks I'm crazy!

Let's face it, there is not a single one of us who actually believes that we will be the one to start the next Leroux Fire, which was sparked from a campfire. We each do the things we think necessary to be safe. Some of us may be more vigilant – you may use a different adjective; my husband, for example, refers to my keen fire awareness as “militant prevention” – than others, but we all believe we are the ones acting responsibly when those around us may not be.

What I've realized through working for the Forest Service is that bad things can happen even when people have the best intentions, especially in a year like this one. According to the National Weather Service, May 2002 will go down in the record books as the driest May since weather records began in 1898. It doesn't get much drier than zero precipitation, and that's what we got in May.

Add the current dry conditions with the years of drought we have been enduring, and you've got a deficit of almost 44 inches since 1995. It doesn't take much to start a fire in conditions like these.

I've been impressed with the level of knowledge amongst local folks regarding fire danger and prevention. With the outstanding level of awareness and valid concerns about protecting our forest, I've had a lot of questions about how our forest's neighbors can get involved – help the Forest Service out. Here's what you can do.

First and most basically, please respect the closure order. There is no way that we can certify that you know what you are doing and someone else doesn't when it comes to fire prevention. Believe me, we all want to be able to hike, jog, and picnic in and generally enjoy our forest. As soon as we feel the threat of wildland fire has been reduced adequately by precipitation, we will open the forest and wholeheartedly invite everyone back in. Until then, please stay out of closed areas. For every patrol person that is called out to check on your activities, that is a patrol person who is not available to seek out other offenders or to fight and hopefully stop any fire starts that do occur.

Second, please let us know if you see something suspicious. The Williams and Tusayan districts of the forest are closed except for the developed campgrounds, which have hosts on-site 24 hours a day who can monitor activity. Since everything else is closed, we do not have open areas on the forest where local residents can patrol. However, locals can still be invaluable to us by reporting suspicious activity to our closure violation phone line. That number is 928-527-3692. The forest left major access routes to private property open for landowner use, so on your way to and from your property you could see someone or something in the forest that shouldn't be there. Please don't confront violators directly, as you don't know what their reaction might be. However, you can make the difference in protecting our forest by reporting violations promptly.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, you can reduce the threat that wildland fire poses to all of us by doing your part to reduce the fuels that feed fires. You've heard it before, and you'll hear it again – implement defensible area techniques before nature does it for you. You can do many inexpensive things to protect your property such as raking pine needles and debris from your yard, clearing pine needles from your roof and rain gutters, and moving woodpiles away from your house. You can find out more about protecting your

property from fire by visiting www.firewise.org or by contacting your local land management agency or fire department.

If you are already doing these things, let me be the first to thank you. Otherwise, it's time for all of us to ask ourselves this question:

Am I part of the problem or part of the solution when it comes to wildland fire prevention?

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