

Stephen J. Pyne

The hot wars had ended, the Cold War had calmed, and the United States had a decade's worth of accumulated experience in large-scale organization and applied science, and—not least—a mountainous surplus of military hardware. The time seemed right for a grand exercise to transfer those varied stockpiles from the military to fire protection. The outcome was a 1-year crash program in 1954 called Operation Firestop.

Grand Exercise

Staged in California, Firestop assembled the major fire agencies operating in that state, among them the Forest Service, California Department of Forestry, Los Angeles County Fire Department, Office of Civil Defense, and Department of Defense, which also made Camp Pendleton available as a site for field trials. The program tried everything, from chemical retardants, to helicopters and airtankers, to conversions of jeeps, to experiments in fire behavior. The immediate consequences were few, but the fallout, over the next decade, was considerable. The project sparked what is widely regarded as a golden age of equipment development. Nothing like it has happened since.

Which is why the time has arrived to restage it. In some respects, the technology of fire management and the tactics of fighting and lighting

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fires have not significantly evolved since the afterglow of Firestop. A firefight today looks much like one 50 years ago. Crews function in much the same way, though outfitted with niftier clothing and smaller radios. Aircraft fly similar missions—sometimes it's the same aircraft. Engines lay hose in the same ways to the same ends. Of course, some aspects have changed: the need for housing protection, for example. But in general, newer technology simply adds to the mix, like giving firefighters fire shelters. It doesn't replace staffing or fundamentally alter tactics.

Time for Another Study?

It may be that this is just how fire management must work. Or maybe not. But it would be worthwhile to sponsor a wholesale, across-the-board experiment in modernizing fire equipment and tactics, and in particular trying new ways to integrate high-technology with on-the-ground operations. Put it all up for examination—not policy, of which we have gobs, but practice.

What is the best kind of crew for different jobs? How can information technology simplify tasks, improve crew performance and safety, reduce costs? What mix of aircraft best suits contemporary fire management? What sorts of prescribed burning belong with what lands, and how might modern technology make it both more specific and more broadly applicable? What kind of military equipment and tactics might transfer? Some of this goes on, of course, but in a hand-to-mouth sort of way. A decade of big fire years, the morphing complexity of fire management, and quantum advances in electronics, materials science, and communications all argue for a more resolute and systematic study.

I propose a 2-year program. Stage it from 2004 to 2005, which would coincide with the 50th anniversary of Firestop and the 100th anniversary of the Forest Service. The immediate results would, in all likelihood, be marginally impressive. The benevolent fallout could linger for decades. ■

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