

# Lowline Fire News

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## Rocky Mountain Complex Incident Management Team 1

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## Wildfires and Mosaics

When people see a map of a wildfire, they sometimes assume that everything within the fire perimeter is black and dead. That usually is not the case. Fires typically burn across a landscape in varying intensities. Some areas may be severely burned, others lightly burned, and some not burned at all. This patchwork is referred to by fire professionals as a “mosaic”.

These mosaic-producing fires create a diversity of age classes of trees and other vegetation. But what causes fires to create this patchwork across the countryside? There are many factors. For example, some kinds of vegetation are more susceptible to burning than others. A fire may burn hotly through a stand of conifer trees, but then lie down or even go out when it reaches an adjacent stand of aspens. Terrain plays a role as well. Fires typically burn hotter on steeper slopes than on gentler ones because heat rises and pre-heats the vegetation upslope.



*Photo of a mosaic burn pattern on the Lowline Fire, August 1, 2023*

They also burn hotter on south facing slopes than they do on northerly ones because of more direct exposure to sun and greater drying of the vegetation. Wind can be another factor. Terrain that is exposed to winds will burn hotter than one where the vegetation is sheltered from the wind. All these factors combine to produce a highly variable pattern of vegetation across a landscape. The question, then, is this a good or a bad thing? If you were growing a monoculture of apple trees, or even a plantation of pine trees for future timber harvest, it might be a bad thing. But in a natural forest that provides for a multitude of uses, it is almost always a good thing. Mosaic forests provide ideal habitat for a myriad of wildlife species. They are more resistant to insects and disease. They are less susceptible to wildfires. And they are beautiful to look at.

Wildfires have been creating mosaic forests for thousands of years. For only about the past 100 years, we have been putting out every fire we could, and forests have responded by becoming overgrown, fuel laden, and more homogenous than in the past. Mother Nature is always trying to restore things back to their natural condition, and fire is one of her tools of choice. That’s why we’ve seen an increase in wildfire numbers, size, and intensity across our country in recent decades. Fortunately, there are things

smart forest managers can do to help Mother Nature out and avoid some of the negative effects of fire. Sustainable timber harvest, judicious thinning, and prescribed burning under carefully selected conditions can add diversity to a landscape and help keep or restore forests to a mosaic pattern.

When your local land managers develop plans for restoring burned areas to a more natural condition and for treating other areas to help prevent more fires like this one, they will be seeking your input and involvement. Getting involved is one of the best things you can do to help restore the forests in this beautiful part of Colorado.

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