

Book Review

Hudson M., 2011. *Fire Management in the American West: Forest Politics and the Rise of Megafires*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Reviewed by Andrew M. Miller, Faculty of Environment and Geography,
University of Manitoba.

Dr. Mark Hudson's *Fire Management in the American West: Forest Politics and the Rise of Megafires* (2011), presents a political ecology of the US federal forest fire management policy as it emerged from the social and political contexts of the early 20th century to the 1950s.

In scholarship and prose that is sophisticated, thorough and accessible, Hudson connects theories of the limits of the state and the contest between forest management and industry to explain policies that have contributed to an ecological and political environment where larger more extreme fires are increasingly common. It is a relevant extension of the fire scholarship that will be attractive to those with an interest in the history and management of the western federal forest system, arguably the largest commons in North America.

The ground that Hudson explores is not unfamiliar for those with a background in forest ecology and history of the American West. Fire in many western North American ecosystems is an essential metabolic process of stand establishment, growth and maintenance. It has a role in nutrient recycling, influences species composition and arrangement, stand structure and serves to reset ecological succession. Prior to European settlement forest fires were widespread, naturally occurring and in many forest systems of a low intensity due to lower fuel loads. Fifty to 100 years of aggressive fire suppression have altered the structure and fuel loads and allowed settlement of former wild lands where fire once played an integral part.

The USFS was created at the turn of the 20th century with the intention of curbing the worst excesses of a wood industry that produced fibre without regard for regional ecological or economic consequences. The first USFS Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot promoted a vision of regulation of forest resources as essential for continued productivity to serve national well-being. Through his exploration

of correspondence between founding forest management professionals, public servants, and forest industry leaders, industry newsletters and public relations campaigns and interviews with current forestry managers, Hudson explores several myths about the development of the current fire environment and policies for fire management. Among these myths are that the USFS has always been a comfortable bed fellow with the industry it was created to supply with fibre and that it has had an entirely free hand in the development of fire suppression policies. These sources convincingly demonstrate that the application of ecosystem management have historically been circumscribed by the powerful industries which have been able to mobilize public opinion and political action with greater agility than the bureaucracy.

Hudson provides a grim assessment of the progress made towards what others have termed ecological modernization – that market demands can rationally shift to favour modes of management and production which make good ecological sense. As evidence to the contrary he indicates continued tendencies to grow and even rebuild burned homes into forested areas on the edge of urban wildland interfaces. In spite of the increasing pronouncements by the USFS of changes in direction of forest management including more measured approaches to fire management and rehabilitation of unhealthy stands these programs are outspent by orders of magnitude to the annual dollars spent in fire suppression in a continuation of the “crisis of crisis management.”

In spite of his convincing case study, Hudson refrains from concluding with a “generalized claim about the ultimate limits of state-led environmental management under capitalism.” Much in keeping, however, with 2012’s increasingly public distrust of short-sighted capitalism, he asks instead the poignant question: under what conditions can the health of the environment be made the driving criterion for decision-makers and managers?