



WILDFIRE

has rolled through, what do you do now?

A NATURAL RESOURCE PERSPECTIVE

Seeing a place you love turned into a wasteland after a fire can be devastating.

Wanting to try and fix it is a natural reaction – the desire to invest time and money into cleaning it up and helping the land return to its former state is powerful.

But give yourself a reality check on what would be the best way to rebuild. You've got a rare opportunity to challenge your thinking and perhaps find a new way to enjoy the land and the changes that will take place before your eyes.

Take a step back

Most of us who enjoy a forest will want to make the burned land a forest as quickly as possible. We often look to planting trees as the preferred route; however, think this through before diving in.

Humans often want to make things into what we think they should be. Less within our nature is working with nature to nudge and encourage slower change and appreciating what is here. Quick-fix options may be feasible for those with unlimited funds; however, if you have limited resources and are managing land beyond a few acres, the economic realities will hit home.

Chances of success are another consideration, such as with tree plantings. More than 80 percent may die in the first two seasons if the trees are not watered consistently.

Take some time, slow down, assess, and develop a feasible plan.

Gauge the severity of the burn and the erosion potential. How hot a fire burns greatly affects recovery time. Areas where wildfire burns were not as hot tend to recover quicker on their own (many plants will survive the burn and re-sprout quickly from seed). More extreme burns will recover slower. How to assess burn severity is in the publication *Living with Wildfire in Wyoming*. This free publication is at many University of Wyoming Extension, Wyoming State Forestry Division, and conservation district offices and available online by going to barnyardsandbackyards.com and clicking on Wildfire under Treasure Trove of Information, then Getting Started.

Look at the soil

Erosion is next. The land may be prone to erosion if the property was severely burned and is on a hillside or other significant slope. Topsoil will be washed away by rainstorms and fast snow melt, or blown away by wind, etc.

The topsoil is needed as a base for new plant growth but may instead erode and wash into nearby streams or other waterbodies. Steps can be taken to reduce erosion. If the property is flatter and the burn less severe, erosion may not be a significant concern.

Look at the remaining trees

There are likely standing burned tree trunks if the area was wooded. Some were completely burned and obviously dead while others may have some green needles and may survive. The following spring will tell the story on what survives and what won't.

Survey the property and make a plan. There will be sensitive sites around a home or other areas that will need standing dead trees removed and where new plantings can be established and cared for until ready to survive on their own.

The standing dead trees on the rest of the land will eventually fall and either rot or become fuel for the next fire. You might choose to cut them down and leave them lay, or harvest them for timber products if reasonable. If the plan is to lay them down and leave them, drop them perpendicular to the slope of the land to slow erosion. The trees will provide catchments for soil and places for new plants to establish.

Time is of the essence if the plan is to salvage the lumber. The wood can turn "punk" and lose any value for timber products within two seasons after the fire.

Mother Nature's succession

Whether removed or not, nature's process of succession is already



Nature begins its process of succession soon after a fire.

starting and will play out before your eyes. Eventually the early seral (pioneer) plants will pop their heads up among the black soil. These plants are often annuals (they sprout from seed each year), and they often serve a role in nature's recovery. Early seral plants may include kochia, lambs quarter, sand-drop seed, and annual wildflowers, among others. Time spent identifying these plants will help determine if they are benign, helpful, or potentially too weedy. Living plants on the soil will feed soil microbes, provide channels for water to enter the soil, and provide the environment for the next wave of plants to establish.

No tree canopy means more sunshine. The next several years will witness the succession of one plant community to the next, moving from annuals to perennials (oftentimes wildflowers), and from grasses toward shrubs, and finally slowly moving toward the trees many of us enjoy.

Aspen trees may recover quickly if lucky enough to have them as part of your system; otherwise, the trees might be several decades away from dominating the site.

The plants that come before the trees may provide benefits you will enjoy. The grasses will be much more productive than when conifers dominated. Grazing animals will take advantage of this change, and this might provide the opportunity to see different wildlife than before or the opportunity to add or increase the number of livestock. If plans include livestock, be sure to follow good grazing practices by allowing the plants time to fully recover following each grazing event, or you will create long-term weed problems.

'You have two options'

I was a part of a group of natural resource professionals doing a post-fire assessment for a landowner several years ago. The landowner loved the site and was devastated at the esthetics of the site following the fire. A colleague of mine, Ryan Amundson, put it well when he said, "You have two options here. Sell this property and go buy one that hasn't burned yet, or change your thinking and learn to enjoy and embrace the successional process that will occur over the coming decades."

I greatly appreciated the way Ryan put this. Learning to enjoy nature's changes can put a whole new light on what will unfold on a property.

You can't rebuild in six months what took generations to build. If you need expediency, finding a new site with trees might be a better option than trying to arm-wrestle Mother Nature.

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Have agricultural land that burned?

Wyoming is no stranger to wildfire. Each year varies but no year is without fire - whether in timber, sage, or grassland country. The Roosevelt Fire northwest of Pinedale and Britania Mountain Fire west of Wheatland last year burned over 93,000 acres in Albany, Platte, and Sublette counties, including over 35,000 acres of private lands.

The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers technical assistance to help assess the land and plan potential recovery activities and, in some cases, financial assistance to agricultural producers to install measures that reduce post-fire damage and aid in the rehabilitation process. Those could include items such as livestock water developments to guide grazing, fencing, grass seedings and other measures to revegetate dozered fire lines,

deferment of grazing, and storm water runoff control.

Funds were available in 2018 to assist those affected by the Roosevelt and Britania Mountain fires. Landowners interested in technical (planning) or financial assistance should stop by their local NRCS office and enquire about opportunities available through NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Participation in EQIP is limited to those lands capable of agricultural production and individuals or entities that meet current eligibility requirements. Applications will undergo a review and ranking process. For more information about NRCS's programs, initiatives, and services in Wyoming, visit them at www.wy.nrcs.usda.gov or call or drop by your local NRCS office.

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