

Remarks on Postfire Seeding

Boyd Gibbons

California Department of Fish and Game, 1416 Ninth St., Sacramento, CA 95814
Tel. (916) 322-2493; Fax (916) 324-0475

Abstract. Active management of burned watersheds by seeding is a questionable practice.

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Having experienced earthslides after fires, Californians have come to expect that government will—or ought to—seed burned slopes with grass to keep mud from ending up in their living rooms. These expectations drive policy largely because the public (especially in southern California) tends to believe that only by reseeding will the hillsides stay in place. Thus, for years the seed has gone onto the slopes.

The scientific literature on post-fire erosion in chaparral suggests that such assumptions are wobbly, and, more often than not, the seed should stay in the bag. After a fire, much of the debris—or dry ravel—moves quickly to the drainage channels, ready to flow as soon as it rains. Reseeding of burned slopes with grass seed can do little if anything to retard that erosion and, as the

experience after the Oakland fires suggests, may only increase erosion by attracting gophers which disturb the soil. Additionally, the seeded rye grass can choke back the regrowth of soil-holding native shrubs and forbs while adding fuel on the hills, setting up the landscape for more frequent grass fires that retard what few shrubs are left.

By necessity and custom, science advances in small increments, building knowledge about natural processes by experiment and analysis. Such is the nature of scientific inquiry, careful and probative, not given to the kind of splashy news that attracts wide attention.

We're in one of those peculiar dilemmas where the voice of science, confined to its literature, is not being heard by the audience that needs to listen. It's the age-old problem of communication. On this issue of fire and erosion, the scientific establishment must find ways of simplifying what is known and carrying this message to the public. Otherwise, public policy will be dragged along by habit and error to the great expense of the public purse—and of the environment.