

# WE STILL NEED SMOKEY BEAR!

Jon E. Keeley

It was gratifying to see articles in recent issues of *Fire Management Today* clarifying the role of Smokey Bear in wildland fire management strategies (Baily 1999; Brown 1999). These articles clearly spelled out Smokey's importance in reducing unplanned human-ignited wildland fires and rightly criticized attempts to detract from Smokey's campaign (Williams 1995; see also Vogl 1973).

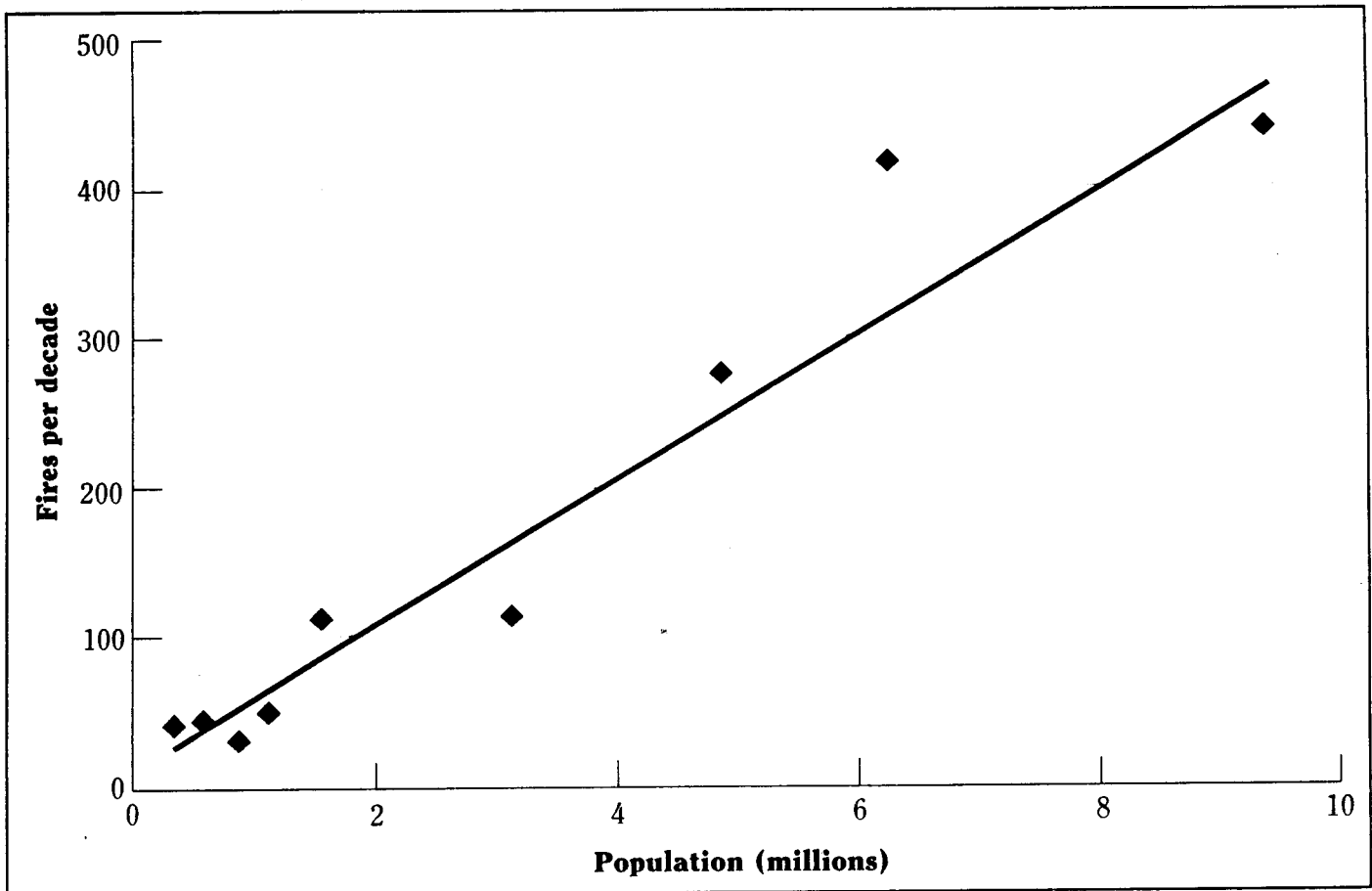
*Jon Keeley is the station leader for the USDI U.S. Geological Survey, Western Ecological Research Center, Sequoia and Kings Canyon Field Station, Three Rivers, CA.*

Fire prevention strategies aimed at reducing unplanned ignitions remain very desirable.

## Why Smokey?

Continuing the Smokey campaign is essential for two reasons. First, in western coniferous forests where natural fires have been largely excluded, fire management focuses on the controlled reintroduction of fire. Therefore, fire prevention strategies aimed at reducing

unplanned ignitions are still very desirable. Second, western shrublands in California's coastal ranges have experienced a massive increase in human-caused fires during the 20th century (fig. 1). Human-caused fires continue to threaten the region's natural ecosystems (Keeley et al. 1999).



**Figure 1**—Population growth and number of fires per decade in Los Angeles and Riverside Counties from 1910 to 1999 (CDF 2000). The data suggest a linear correlation ( $r^2 = 0.96$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) between population density and fire frequency in the two fastest growing counties in southern California. Illustration: Jon Keeley, U.S. Geological Survey, Three Rivers, CA.

## Population growth in southern California is creating unprecedented challenges for wildland fire management.

Smokey's critics are apparently concerned that Smokey is preventing the public from perceiving the natural role of fire in coniferous forests such as ponderosa pine. There is understandable worry that public opposition might block future efforts to restore natural fire regimes.

However, it is important to note that the historical reluctance to use fire in coniferous forests originated not with the public, but with scientists and policymakers (Clar 1959). Critics such as Brown (1999) and Baily (1999) hope to combine into a single message the need for natural fire regimes and the necessity for public fire prevention. Although the resulting message might be complicated, it nonetheless represents a reality that must be dealt with. Simplistic messages are inappropriate.

### Fire Danger in Southern California

Southern California's shrublands represent a situation very different from western coniferous forests, where fire exclusion has often increased fire return intervals. In southern California, the landscape is currently subject to an unnaturally high frequency of fire (Keeley et al. 1999). Major population centers sit astride fire-prone ecosystems, and human activities have vastly reduced the fire return interval. Unlike elsewhere in the West, gaining public acceptance for the natural role of fire is not a high priority. Instead, concern justly focuses on spiraling increases in population density.

Population growth in southern California, coupled with increasing access to wildland areas, creates unprecedented challenges for wildland fire management. Fire suppression crews, like Alice in

Wonderland, must "run just to stay in place"; and southern California, like the Red Queen, yells, "Faster!" Now more than ever, Smokey and his message are needed.

### Literature Cited

- Baily, A. 1999. A birthday letter to Smokey. *Fire Management Notes*. 59(4): 8-10.
- Brown, H. 1999. Smokey and the myth of nature. *Fire Management Notes*. 59(3): 6-11.
- CDF (California Division of Forestry and Fire Protection). 2000. California fire history database. Sacramento, CA: CDF, Fire and Resource Assessment Program.
- Clar, C.R. 1959. California government and forestry from Spanish days until the creation of the Department of Natural Resources in 1927. California Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry.
- Keeley, J.E.; Fotheringham, C.J.; Morais, M. 1999. Reexamining fire suppression impacts on brushland fire regimes. *Science*. 284: 1829-1832.
- Vogl, R.J. 1973. Smokey's mid-career crisis. *Saturday Review of the Sciences*. 1: 23-29.
- Williams, T. 1995. Only you can postpone fires. *Sierra*. 80(4): 36-43, 67-69. ■

Now more than ever,  
Smokey and his message  
are needed in shrubland ecosystems.