

# 2000 Cerro Grande Fire Still Misunderstood

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The 2000 Cerro Grande fire, like all disasters, had many causes — few as simple as originally depicted. And, like most disasters, if anything could go wrong, it did.

The fire, called by some the “millennium fire,” represented the first in a new generation of super fires with origins going back to the 1880s when live-stock grazing interrupted the natural burn cycle, followed by fire suppression beginning in 1911. These resulted in catastrophic timber growth. That’s part of the blame.

Many cite the Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Investigative Report, which blames Bandelier National Monument for the Cerro Grande fire. But the so-called Babbitt Report, after then-Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt who commissioned it, was hastily compiled even as the fire raged and critical personnel were unavailable.

In my judgment, this report was more to distance the Clinton administration from the disaster than look at what really went wrong during a fire roughly three times larger than any New Mexico had seen. The



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**A mountain of smoke dwarfs the Jemez as the Cerro Grande Fire rages toward Los Alamos in this May 7, 2000 photo**

report blamed the men and women on the ground — who, granted, made mistakes — while ignoring cause within the prescribed-burn system and the context: that the fire was inevitable considering the ticking time-bomb situation in the forests.

A subsequent National Park Service report was preoccupied with refuting the Babbitt Report and, again, blamed low-ranking employees rather than look to cause within its own sys-

tem and without.

Los Alamos had ample warning. The 1950s Water Canyon fire roared to the edge of town, triggering an evacuation, a fact lost to Cold War-era secrecy. Then, the 1977 La Mesa, the 1996 Dome and the 1998 Oso Complex fires threatened the town, while an outspoken Forest Service official, Bill Armstrong, and Los Alamos’ fire department warned of the threat due to heavy timber to the west.

Yet, the town, the lab and others failed to adequately thin timber, often the result of homeowner protests, rather than organized opposition. As a result, a fuel break on the town’s west side was moved too high up the mountains to be effective. The Forest Service, in 1998, proposed thinning 19,000 acres west of town, the largest effort of its type in the nation’s history. But this was not funded by 2000.

At the time, parks, such as Bandelier, had to compete for limited burn funds through a secret process, with “low bidders” winning funds. The bidding system caused pressure to get the burn done or be forced through a new bidding process — and perhaps not win. It also forced parks to design burns on the cheap. A standard, across all fire-management agencies, was to under-staff burns and call on backups, sometimes from other agencies, only as needed.

The protocol for conducting prescribed burns also inadequately rated areas outside the burn for risk-management purposes. A town and a national laboratory, in the danger-rating system, were viewed large-

ly the same as trees should the fire escape.

Clearly, Bandelier erred in igniting during a dry spring. Yet, a failed burn in the fall caused the park to believe the only way it could get adequate burn on the high-altitude peak would be to burn in the dry spring, like that in 2000.

Two myths are that Bandelier had not told others of its impending burn and that others warned it not to light.

Bandelier issued press releases. The Los Alamos Fire Department agreed with Bandelier’s plan. Park officials notified other agencies and announced plans at a community meeting.

No one protested, although one Forest Service official claims he warned burn boss Mike Powell not to light. After the fire was burning, a Los Alamos National Laboratory emergency coordinator voiced concerns to two low-ranking Bandelier employees. He did not radio his concerns to crews on Cerro Grande. Neither the Forest Service official or the lab’s coordinator protested through official channels.

Bandelier knew that, due to a prevailing southwest-to-north-

east wind, heavy timber in its Frijoles Canyon was a threat to Los Alamos. Yet, the canyon could not be dealt with until timber uphill on Cerro Grande was burned.

A critical point coloring Bandelier’s actions was that it had recently snowed on Cerro Grande and park officials were so preoccupied with fears that it would not get burn adequate to kill trees that it failed to focus on drought conditions outside the 300-acre area of the first phase of the burn. Drought in the region was rated as moderate, although the Forest Service had shut down burns.

Yet, something else drove Bandelier. The Oso-Complex fire north of Los Alamos was arson-caused, as was the Guaje Ridge fire, ignited on the edge of town on May 3, 2000, the day before Bandelier ignited. There was reason to move quickly, according to then Park Superintendent Roy Weaver, before the arsonist targeted Bandelier.

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