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Trails
After the Wildfire

What would you say if your home was on fire?

A bolt of lightning strikes in the middle of the night and sparks a fire. Two days later, the only thing left after the burn is a barren landscape that hardly resembles the once-lush and living soil that existed only a few days before. The firefighters are exhausted. The homeowners are devastated by their losses, and we, being completely selfish trail users, are devastated to learn that our trails are literally dust. The "brown powder" has been replaced by ash and soot. It's a common occurrence in SoCal, and one that we've unwillingly become accustomed to.

Info from Steve Messer of CORBA

What we've experienced in our testing grounds could be a reality for many other riding spots, especially if scientists are right about global climate change. Some argue that weather patterns are becoming more severe, temperatures are rising, and the threat of destructive wildfires is a reality every single year.

This is the story of one of our favorite testing grounds, Strawberry Peak. It burned to the ground in 2009. It's now coming back to life, thanks to the efforts of some of the hardest-working riders in the world, the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association (CORBA). We went to them to find out how a trail can be resurrected after complete destruction, and to find a light at the end of the tunnel.

MBA: What can you say about a burned-up trail? It's a serious bummer for the riding community to see one of its favorite trails go up in smoke. You've dealt with this in the aftermath of the Station Fire that scorched Strawberry Peak just over six years ago. What did this do to the trail system?

Wildfire

CORBA: In Southern California's unique Mediterranean climate, our biggest fire season is immediately followed by our wettest season. It usually isn't the fire that damages trails; it's rain falling on hillsides denuded of vegetation. When plant life that soaks up rainwater and holds the soil in place is burned away, the water runs off more rapidly, taking the soil with it and eroding trails much more quickly and destructively. After burning 160,000 acres over seven weeks, the Station Fire was brought under control with the help of the first rains of the winter season. A subsequent series of powerful El Niño storms did most of the damage to trails, roads and campgrounds.

In the Angeles National Forest, we have hundreds of miles of "legacy" trails—trails built during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—that were not built to modern trail standards. These trails tend to be steeper and rougher than newer trails and were the most heavily damaged. Trails following creeks or in riparian zones were washed away by floodwaters. Major mudslides and debris flows buried trails and campgrounds. Drainages where rainwater once trickled gently across a sweet section of singletrack turned into eroded canyons 20 feet deep. Fire roads that were once accessible by passenger vehicles became riddled with car-eating ruts and slides. The devastation in some places was utter and complete, with no trace of the original trails left other than memories and GPS tracks.

MBA: Obviously, the fires take a serious toll on the landscape, but are there other things to worry about on the trail after the fire?

CORBA: Composite retaining walls, sometimes known by their brand name, Sutter Walls, are a mix of steel I-beams and treated wooden slats. They're used to help stabilize trails in steeper, looser terrain typical of the San Gabriel Mountains. Many of these burned in the Station Fire. We've been replacing these wood slats as part of our restoration efforts.

Fires also mean smoke and ash. If a fire is burning upwind of you, be prepared for smoke. If you're riding through a recently burned area, fine ash and dust can cause breathing problems and irritate eyes. Asthma sufferers and those wearing contact lenses should take extra precautions.

Riding a trail after a fire can change a trail's character in many ways. Trails that are on steep mountain slopes often have a wall of brush separating the rider from the vertical exposure. When that brush burns away, the exposure can be a lot more daunting than it was before the fire. On the flip side, the views can be outstanding. You can often see things you never knew were there.

MBA: Wildfires are a natural part of a healthy forest life cycle—or at least that's what they taught us in grade school. How long can you expect to wait before a burned-up landscape will resemble its former self? Are there things to watch for when riding or building during the "regeneration" process?

CORBA: For more than a century

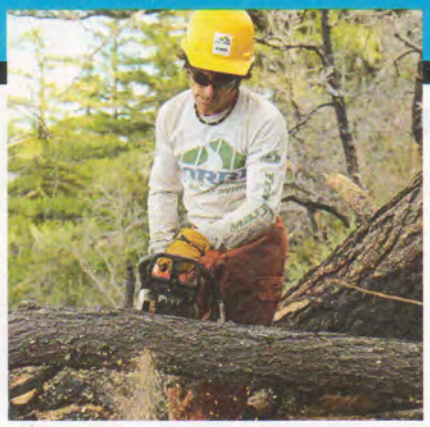
Wildfire

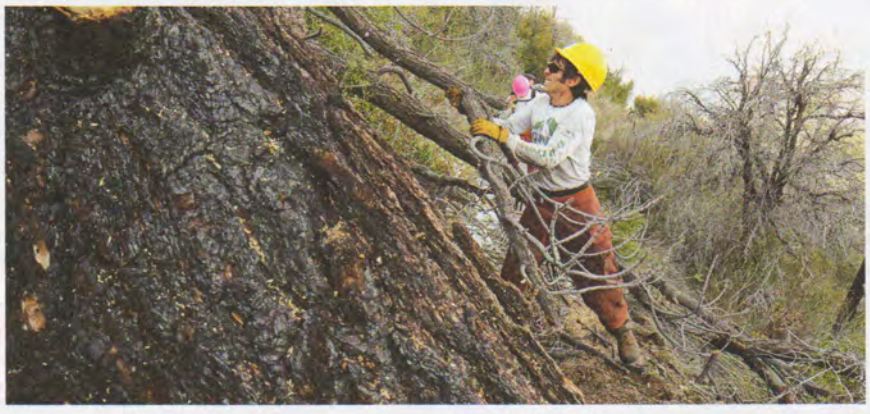
humans have been interfering with the natural fire patterns of the western United States. In some areas there are more frequent fires due to human-caused ignition. Chaparral is adapted to less frequent, more "devastating" fires like the Station Fire. Chaparral typically takes 10 to 20 years to fully recover. If Chaparral burns twice or more in 20 years, it may not fully recover and can undergo a "type conversion" where the native shrub land is killed off and replaced by invasive weeds and grasses.

In other areas, like our Southwest Ponderosa Pine forests that typically burn every 10 to 50 years, we've suppressed fires for 50 to 100 years or more. This results in an accumulation of fuel that burns hotter, with more devastating fires that necessitate a much longer recovery. Old-growth forests can take upwards of 50 years or more to return to their pre-fire majesty.

Different vegetation types and microclimates recover at different rates, depending on many factors. Higher elevations, with a shorter growing season and colder temperatures, take longer to recover. While the evidence of fires is almost always present, most areas will appear to have come back after five to 15 years. It may take much longer, however, for them to fully return to a pre-fire state.

Nature abhors a vacuum. After a fire, it doesn't take long for the first green shoots to appear. Trees that appear dead will begin sprouting from their charred root balls or trunks. Poodle Dog Bush (PDB for short) is native to the mountains of Southern California. It's a fire opportunist; its dormant seeds are among the first to sprout after a fire in the 3500–7500-





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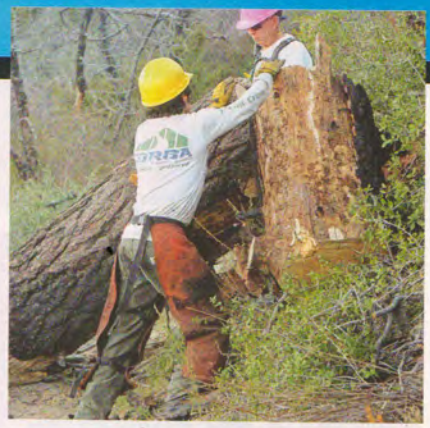
After the burn: The Strawberry Peak trail was closed for several years following the Station Fire. The members of CORBA were granted special access to this area to assess the damage. These are the photos they took of the devastated landscape.



foot elevation range. It serves a vital role in helping stabilize the soil after a fire, but it's also toxic to many people. After contact with PDB, sensitive people can develop nasty, oozing rashes that can last more than two weeks. Mountain bikers have been dealing with PDB encroaching on fire roads and trails since the 2009 Station Fire. PDB's life cycle is from 5 to 10 years after a fire, so it's now beginning to decline. Once the native shrubs fill in, the Poodle Dog will die off and go dormant until its seeds are awakened by the next fire or other soil disturbance.

Another difficult problem after a fire are standing dead trees. Six years after the Station Fire, these dead trees have rotted and weakened enough that the slightest wind can easily topple them. These "hazard trees" or "widowmakers" fall across and block fire roads and trails every time the wind blows. As Forest Service-certified sawyers and mountain bikers, we've been doing our best to cut trees off trails whenever they fall. In 2015, we cut more than 150 downed trees to restore the 1.5-mile Vetter Mountain Trail in the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, one of the most heavily burned areas of the forest. We're still working on it.

MBA: What would you caution riders about after a serious trail-damaging event? Do you have any horror stories about riders trying to use the trail too soon?

CORBA: It's always best to check with the land manager to find out what's open and what's closed and to obey any closure orders. Dozens of people who ignored Station Fire closures got lost trying to find trails buried in mudslides and debris flows, or found themselves in situations where they couldn't get out after trees fell across the road behind them. Several had to be extracted by Search and Rescue parties after spending an unplanned night in a burnt forest.

Always ride a little more cautiously after a rain in a burn area. In burn areas, a trail can be damaged by extreme erosion with

Wildfire

a relatively small amount of rain. Some gullies were more than 20 feet deep where trails had traversed drainages in the Station Fire. Sometimes IMBA chapters and local riders know more about trail conditions than the land managers, so don't be afraid to get online and ask.

It's also extremely important to stay on designated trails. When hillsides are bare, you can see things—points of interest, rocky outcroppings, viewpoints—that were previously hidden by brush. Since no bushwhacking is required, there's a lot of temptation to ride or hike off-trail to see these things up close. In this vulnerable state, a track remains visible on the charred ground for months and can quickly become a new "user-created" trail if others follow it. It can become permanently etched into the ashen landscape before plant life recovers. In the once-grassy slopes burned by the Springs Fire in Point Mugu State Park, this has become a major problem. The burned areas there are now criss-crossed with a latticework of user-created trails branching off the official trails.

Switchback cutting is a major cause of trail damage, with or without a burned landscape. After a fire, when there's no brush to whack through or to obscure the trail below, it's too easy and tempting to go off-trail and shortcut a switchback. The damage from just one person saving 10 seconds on a ride or hike by cutting a switchback can require hundreds of volunteer hours to repair once rainwater follows that cut. Just don't do it.

MBA: When natural trail damage like this happens, how can riders get involved to help the rebuilding process?

Tools of the trade: Steve Messer rides his Niner ROS 9 hooked up to a trailer to tote the 75 pounds worth of chainsaws, tools, and protective gear needed to keep the trails groomed.

CORBA: Get on the mailing lists of your local IMBA chapter or other volunteer trail groups. Subscribe to their event calendars and show up. Most IMBA chapters schedule regular trail workdays on their local trails. After a fire, those efforts will often increase. If there isn't a local IMBA chapter, the land manager will have a list of volunteer groups who help maintain trails. Usually no experience is needed, as most volunteer trail crew leaders teach trail maintenance techniques on the job.

MBA: What can riders gain by becoming a part of their local trail maintenance group?

CORBA: CORBA's volunteer trail maintenance days are hard work but fun and especially rewarding. You learn to appreciate and understand the forces of nature. You appreciate the efforts of those who originally built the trail. You see trail features that you'd never noticed while bombing downhill at 20 mph. You understand the importance of leaving no trace and low-impact riding (ride it, don't slide it!).

Trails on public land belong to the public—us—and just as our moms told us, we need to take care of our things. When we do, there's nothing like the satisfaction and sense of pride that comes from riding a trail that we helped build, restore or maintain.

CORBA and the Mount Wilson Bicycling Association, the two IMBA chapters covering the Angeles National Forest, have been involved in the restoration and reopening of at least 18 major trails since the Station Fire. We've coordinated our efforts with the Boy Scouts, the Sierra Club, hiking and equestrian groups, the National Forest Foundation, the Los Angeles Conservation Corps and the Forest Service. We're proud to be making a huge difference in getting trails restored and reopened after the Station Fire and continuing to keep trails clear and open to bikes. We're doing our best to be good stewards of our public lands. If you're riding trails maintained by your local IMBA chapter, become a member and support their efforts. Whether you contribute or not, you're benefiting from their work.

MBA: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

CORBA: As mountain bikers, we're all attracted to the outdoors, to being in the forest or a majestic landscape surrounded by nature. When riding a trail through a burn zone, it's easy to become emotionally disheartened by the "moonscape" appearance. That emotional low will eventually pass as we see the forest recover over time, witnessing nature's resilience in action. When we ride through a burn zone and understand that fire is a part of the natural cycle, we can take solace in knowing that we're still just riding our bikes, surrounded by nature. Just watch out for Poodle Dog Bush, unexpected washouts and downed trees. They're part of nature too. ❑