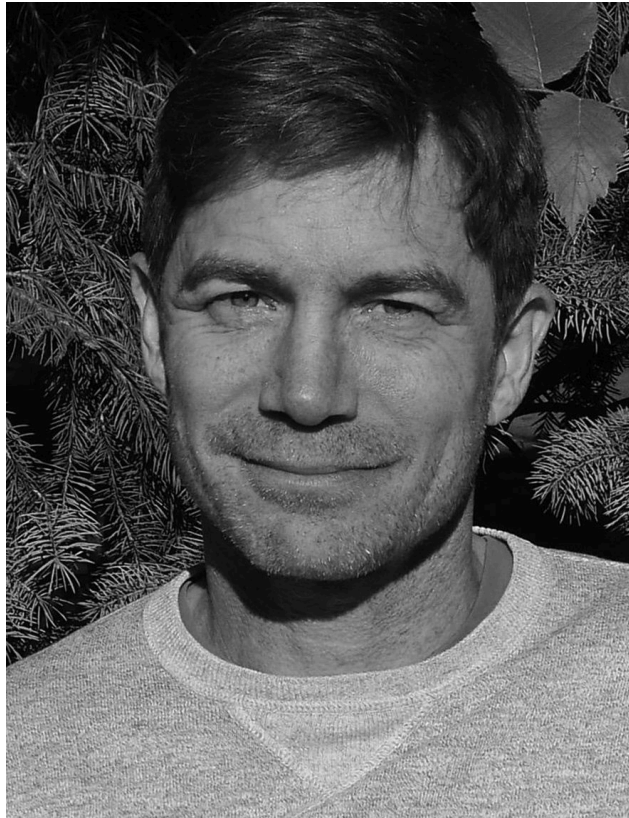


Guest Column: Wind-driven fire ran until the gusts died

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The Marshall Fire that demolished more than 1,000 homes along the front range of Colorado two weeks ago was not unique. This particular kind of fire happened before, on April 17, 2018 - 115 miles due south of the Marshall Fire.

The wildfire was simply called the MM 117 fire for mile marker 117 on Interstate 25 south of Colorado Springs, in El Paso County. Despite earning a federal disaster declaration, and scorching over 43,000 acres, it never rated a real name.

Like the Marshall Fire, this grass fire came on fast and stopped almost as soon as the winds died. At the time, it was the fifth-largest in state history but 100 percent contained in 72 hours. It began when a motorist, their car dragging its muffler, sent sparks into the air when there was just 4 percent humidity and winds blowing up to 80 miles per hour.

Sparks ignited the grass. Fire investigators on the scene said any motorist with an overheating engine could have sparked a blaze. The entire day it seemed all of Colorado was hammered by winds that grounded planes at Denver International, then grounded firefighting planes as well.

Unable to reach homeowners by car, with the fire racing away, frantic officials resorted to pleas over Facebook message boards: "A deputy sheriff said he was driving at 35 mph near the fire Tuesday, April 17, 2018, and it was moving faster than he was," reported Wildfire Today.

The final tally was horrifying for a fire that lasted barely the length of a holiday weekend - 24 structures destroyed, over 43,000 acres scorched, and "untold number of livestock," mostly beef cattle killed. according to the Colorado Springs Gazette.

Speed was a big part of the story. The fire raced due east and covered 20 miles in just a few hours. Along the way, It leaped over roads, torched houses and seemed impossible to stop. Yet when winds died and rains came, containment of the fire happened quickly.

There is a stunning lesson to be learned from this grassland fire: We have little control over wind-whipped grasslands fires once they get going. All we can do is run.

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