

Public Lands Foundation

Position Statement: PS 23-04

Wildland Fire Management

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document updates the Public Lands Foundation's position paper that was written after the disastrous 1994 South Canyon Fire in Colorado, which killed 14 fire fighters. Since that time some dramatic changes have occurred. Record fires in 2000, in the Northern Rockies, 2002 in Florida, Colorado and New Mexico, and 2003 in California have caused tremendous property damage, and loss of human life. These events caused Congress to recognize that wild land fire fighting programs were not part time jobs, and that funding was inadequate and not managed by the agencies in an accountable manner. It also indicated that federal agencies were not effectively utilizing the other fire fighting resources of the states, counties, and municipalities in an effective manner. They also recognized that land management practices needed to be accelerated to prevent large fires; and improve the health of the land; such as, use of prescribed fire, thinning practices, and reducing urban interface problems. A large and new funding process was created, and led to a National Fire Plan. Protecting human life, fire fighter safety, homes and critical national resources are still the fire program priorities the Bureau of Land Management must emphasize.

BACKGROUND

Wild land fires, particularly in the west where BLM is most concerned, are endemic. During extreme weather, characterized by high temperatures, low humidity, and high winds, drought, and large areas of insect depredations, any rational response dictates that there is nothing we can do to prevent or stop all wild land fires. Like hurricanes in the south, tornadoes in the Midwest, and floods along river channels, fire is a natural part of the landscape that we manage. However the extent and size of fires and their resulting damage can be reduced. There is a need to reassess the role of natural fire in certain ecosystems, and to enhance the management of the use of prescribed fire. Yet at the same time to quickly and safely extinguish unwanted fires.

Fires are inherently neither good nor bad. It is an inevitable force that has altered ecosystems throughout time, and will continue to do so in spite of man's efforts. What is not well understood and accepted is that the environment of any particular time has different effects on the behavior of fire as well as on the ecosystems. Human intervention, including fire suppression, in wild lands over the past 250 years has created a far different environment than historically existed, and there is no going back. Vegetative changes, as a result of man's recent increased mobility has also affected wildfires. Invasive annual grasses and weeds are now prevalent. These flammable species create favorable fire conditions and reestablish more rapidly than native vegetation after being burned. During the time the Indians were the primary inhabitants of North America, their use of fire and the effects on the ecosystem, when added to natural causes, were far different because the natural environment in which they lived was not the same we see today. Certainly the changing environment of today is vastly different than it was during 1750. If for no

other reason than that the population then was estimated at 30,000 people compared to around 350,000,000 today, with the largest growth occurring in the western states.

With the significant increase of the population in the west, the wildlands administered by the Bureau of Land Management have increasingly become a place for recreation and expansion of other uses. As a result these lands have been rendered more vulnerable thru incursions of recreational vehicles, chiefly four-wheel drive and all terrain vehicles, but also from hikers, bikers and equestrians. While the number of lightning caused fires has remained reasonably constant, the number of human caused ignitions is rising dramatically. Furthermore, local planning and zoning or the lack thereof has allowed people to move into lands that are known fire hazards areas. They build and landscape houses with materials that increase their vulnerability to fire. As a consequence, more people, their properties, and firefighters are at risk. Of particular concern to the Bureau of land Management are the vast areas in the Great Basin, and Snake River Plains where Cheatgrass and Medusa Head Wild rye have invaded, and the Mojave Desert now being invaded by Red Brome. These highly flammable annual grasses create an ideal fuel base for dangerous fast moving fires that can encompass huge areas from a single ignition.

Fire programs have, with the exception of 2001, continued to be under funded, and treated as part time endeavors. Spikes in funding followed by years of declining funding makes it difficult to maintain and manage an effective fire preparedness level. Use of prescribed fire as a management tool has not always followed proper planning and management procedures, and several incidents have damaged public confidence in this practice. Much of the public still believes, despite concerted efforts to change that thinking, that all fire is bad. While some are beginning to champion prescribed fire, they expect the decades of fuel build- up to be eradicated rapidly, and fail to recognize the need for periodic maintenance burns. The effort to gain a more balanced understanding of the use of fire, and its place in the ecosystem are still desirable. The use of prescribed fire at the right place, the right time, under the right conditions, and properly planned and managed can be beneficial.

After the 2000 fire season that brought wide spread damage to a record number of areas President Clinton directed the Secretaries of the Departments of Agriculture and Interior to prepare a report on how to best reduce the threats and damages of wild land fire and ensure sufficient fire fighting resources for the future. That year more than eight million acres burned, threatened many communities, and was extremely costly not only in lost natural resources but in expended dollars for fighting the fires and subsequent rehabilitation.

The report, "Managing the Impact of Wildfire on Communities and the Environment" more commonly referred to as the National Fire Plan clearly showed that wildland fires were becoming more volatile, dangerous, destructive and difficult to suppress. The National Fire Plan along with the bipartisan 10 Year Implementation Plan, President Bush's Healthy Forest Initiative and the recent Forest Restoration Act, combine to provide the effective blueprint and administrative streamlining to enable an expansion of the fuel hazard reduction and forest and rangeland restoration programs. The key points and recommendations in the National Fire Plan laid the foundation for a long-term program to reduce fire risk, improve ecosystems health, and assist local communities. These fire areas of

emphasis included: (1) Increasing preparedness; (2) Restoring Damaged landscapes; (3) Implementation of a hazardous fuel reduction program; (4) Expand Community Assistance activities, and (5) Accountability. It enables the fire program to become full time, technically sound, well equipped, and managed by an expert and experienced cadre of personnel. It provides mechanisms to up- grade and train local fire protection agencies so they can participate as full partners in fire management programs. Much of the benefit of this plan is yet to be realized. In Fiscal Year 2001, the first year of the National Fire Plan, there was a dramatic increase in funding for the fire programs; however funding has not returned to that level since that date. There are numerous documents to provide specific direction, and these collectively comprise “The National Fire Plan”

Implementation of the National Fire Plan, in addition to coping with the environmental changes fundamentally changes the role of the Bureau of Land Management’s Fire Program. It no longer is confined to public lands. There is much more involvement with local, state, and other fire fighting entities through assistance activities that provide and support equipment, training and tactics in fire suppression. There is the necessity to work with communities, mortgage providers, insurance systems, and planning and zoning organizations, and contractors in the education and assistance to develop more effective ordinances and codes, and hazard reduction, and fuel maintenance programs. There is need to develop scientific and technical knowledge to address environmental requirements. Most emphasis to date has been on the forested areas of the west. New emphasis needs to be placed on dealing with the grasslands and shrublands that are now subject to post fire invasion by non-native undesirable species. These vegetative types are flammable, foster fast moving fires that encompass vast areas and are very prone to repeated burnings.

PLF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Public Lands Foundation believes that protecting human life, fire fighter safety, home and critical national resources are still the fire program priorities the Federal agencies must emphasize.

The PLF therefore recommends that the following guidelines should be part of all Federal wild land fire programs:

1. A consensus must be developed among all fire program entities as to the high priority things we must be doing to protect people, communities, property and natural and cultural resources. These workloads must be prioritized and managed.
2. The protection of people and their property is the priority in every fire management activity. While meeting this goal, the safety of the firefighters must be factored into each suppression strategy of fire. No home, building or stand of trees is as important as the life or welfare of one fire fighter.
3. The protection of homes on private lands has become a major focus of federal fire management programs at the expense of the natural and cultural resources on public lands. Major shares of wildland fire fighting resources are already

dedicated to protecting homes and structures. Homes have to be made fire resistant. The public must do a better job of redeeming their responsibilities to provide defensible space to safeguard their homes from wild land fires. Public resources burn unchecked while fire fighters who are supposed to protect federal lands place themselves at risk providing structure protection. PLF encourages and supports major efforts of the wild land fire community to make homes “Fire wise” by working with homeowners, lenders, insurers, and local governments to require codes to make properties fire safe, and to maintain them in that state recognizing that wild fires are inevitable.

4. Lands open and dedicated for public use, such as logging, grazing, wildlife, and recreation are more subject to human ignitions; therefore it is logical to focus hazard reduction programs in these areas, especially if they are close to residential developments.
5. Continue to take action on fires that do not directly threaten homes or people, as do many of the fires on our public rangelands and forests. High intensity wildfires continue to damage critical habitat, watersheds, and other resource values.
6. Recognize that BLM cannot treat the hundreds of millions of acres of rangeland and forest that are susceptible to future wildfire. Also recognize that man’s impact on the land, especially because of the effects of undesirable nonnative species, makes it very difficult to return the vegetation to its original native condition on areas that have burned at a much greater frequency than was natural. BLM must take a practical approach to rehabilitation and fuel reduction in these degraded areas. One strategy that we recommend is to break these annual grass monocultures with strategically placed green strips in the rangelands shrublands, and with open corridors in the forest where fuel loading has been reduced.
7. Applications of new science, research, and analysis techniques like, the interagency Fire Program Analysis System (FPA) currently under development, is needed. This landscape scale interagency analysis system will identify the firefighting, fuels reduction, and management resources that maximize performance at any viable budget level. It will identify where effective and cost efficient fuel treatments should be planned. There is a need to develop scientific knowledge, experience, and the financial resources to engage in restoration of ecosystems at risk. Agencies need to study the landscape interrelationships of fire problems on range and forest land health, and build consensus for appropriate actions in the future.

This policy paper was prepared by the Idaho- Treasure Valley PLF Chapter, following discussions held at the PLF annual meeting in 2003 at Eugene, Oregon, and has been approved by the PLF Board of Directors.