



## **Public Lands Foundation Position Statement Wildland Fire and Building Landscape Resiliency**

### **Executive Summary**

The nation's wildlands are facing a crisis of gigantic proportions that is growing worse each year due to many compounding conditions that are acting together to adversely impact forest and rangeland health, leaving them susceptible to catastrophic wildland fires. These fires are not only damaging to the land, infrastructure (e.g., housing, buildings, transportation corridors, etc.) and resources, but are also creating public health problems from smoke and water pollutants. Current fires are costing billions of dollars to suppress and are resulting in hundreds of billions in damages. Smoke is having impacts on public health far from where the fires are burning, further adding to the costs associated with this issue. The BLM, along with the U.S. Forest Service and other Federal land management agencies; states, tribes, and local governments; and private landowners must work together across the landscape to manage the growing threat to the Nation's lands. This will take an unprecedented collaborative approach to find workable solutions, billions of dollars, and decades to fully implement. To be workable, land management treatments, community planning, aggressive fire management and suppression, and post-fire restoration must be implemented.

The PLF supports an aggressive, landscape approach to address the deteriorating conditions of the forest and rangelands on BLM-managed public lands in collaboration with the Forest Service, other federal, tribal, state, and local land managers. The landscape approach is well described in the 2014 National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

### **Background**

For over three decades, the problems of forest and rangeland health have been known and talked about. Declines in forest health and resiliency have been recognized and multiple initiatives to address the problems have been started. Over this timeframe there has been some increase in work done on the ground to address this problem; however, the work done has not been at a scale to make a big enough difference. Inconsistent funding, disjointed planning and implementation across landscapes comprised of multiple ownerships, loss of capacity in the BLM and other agencies, and litigation slowing or blocking projects have led to the inability to improve forest and rangeland resiliency across the landscape. Warming temperatures and prolonged drought resulting from a changing climate have led to deteriorating vegetative conditions from insects, disease and changing vegetative composition. Over 100 years of aggressive fire suppression has changed the vegetative composition and density of forestlands and increased fuel loading. In addition, the expanding wildland urban interface has added more housing and infrastructure in the wildlands, adding to the complexity and difficulties of fire suppression efforts.

All of this has combined to place the Nation, especially the West and the communities of the West, in a situation not seen in recent history and is creating an environmental, social, economic and health crisis in the Nation. Just some of the effects of this crisis include:

- Losses of timber to insects, disease and wildfire, resulting in economic losses to local communities dependent on the forests for raw materials, jobs, and timber receipts.
- Reduced recreational opportunities during active wildfires and after while the land recovers.
- Conversion of rangeland vegetation from grass and shrubs to annual grasses, such as cheatgrass and Medusa head increasing fire occurrence and reducing habitat for sagebrush obligate species, such as the Greater sage-grouse.
- Loss of forage for domestic livestock, wildlife, and wild horses and burros.
- Loss of fish and wildlife habitat.
- Loss of soil through erosion.
- Contamination of water supplies, reduction of water quality and quantity, and changes in the timing of snowpack release.
- Loss of homes, businesses, and communities.
- Drastic increases in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas release, exceeding emissions from fossil fuels in some years.
- Health impacts from smoke-locally, nationally, and internationally.
- Emotional and psychological trauma to firefighters, people that work on the lands, and citizens that have lost homes, family and friends, and communities.
- Interruption and closures of state and interstate highway segments because of post-fire debris flows and landslides (e.g., I-70, Glenwood Canyon, Colorado).

There is growing consensus that the status quo is not acceptable and drastic change is required. This will take a long-term approach that includes addressing the climate issues; building landscape resiliency through active management of forests and rangelands; adequately staffing, equipping and funding wildfire management; and improving land use and building code planning at the local, tribal, and state level. All these facets must be addressed simultaneously. They need to be addressed at large landscape levels and coordinated between the federal, state, local and tribal governments. Long-term success will require a commitment of several billion dollars and many years. Once an area is treated, it is imperative that the treatments be periodically maintained to avoid a loss of resiliency in the future. The lack of success with past efforts has resulted from not providing a long-term commitment of funds and changing priorities when the next land management challenge or new initiative surfaces.

The BLM's largest role in responding to this issue is actively managing the land; however, BLM needs to be willing to coordinate with other ownerships and land managers to coordinate actions over large landscapes. The BLM should also interact with county and state planning departments to emphasize wildfire planning in the development of communities and associated roads and infrastructure.

### **PLF Position**

The PLF supports and advocates for the following.

1. Encourage the Administration to carry through with the proposal to convene a wildland fire council to develop and implement a coordinated, intergovernmental, science-based ten-year-plan to significantly reduce wildland fire risk across ownerships. This plan should include a budget request to the Congress to fund the plan for its duration. The plan should include active vegetation management to provide for resilient landscapes to allow for climate change, allow for the return of low intensity fire to fire-adapted ecosystems, plan for post-fire treatment to reduce fuel loads, quickly reestablish desired vegetation to protect the soil and water resources, and provide adequate workforce and equipment to address the current and projected wildfire suppression needs.
2. Support the immediate increase in the pace and scale of landscape treatments to develop forest and rangelands that are resilient to wildfire, insect and disease, and other perturbations. This includes the availability and use of proven tools, such as thinning of forests to reduce density and develop desired species composition, commercial harvest, mechanical vegetative treatments, prescribed fire, the prudent use of wildfire for resource benefits, targeted grazing, and other appropriate practices. The agencies need to plan to rapidly ramp up implementations as funding becomes available.
3. Support an analysis of workforce capacity to assure that the Bureau is adequately staffed to take on the increased workload needed to address these issues-not only in the number of employees, but also staffing with the correct mix of skills and expertise. An analysis conducted in the early 2000s by BLM found that there were significant skill losses in forestry and range management specialists. The perception is that other disciplines have likewise lost capacity. It is critical that the workforce have expertise in ecology and long-term vegetation management that can prescribe and monitor treatments over time, recognizing the dynamics of vegetation changes over time.
4. Support an analysis of the administrative tools that have been developed over time to help address the forest and rangeland health and wildfire issues, such as tools included in the Healthy Forest Restoration Act and others, to determine their effectiveness and use by the agency. Necessary adjustment could then be made by policy or regulatory changes or, if necessary, presented to Congress for amendments to the acts.
5. Support efforts to actively manage forests for health and productivity. Healthy forests serve to counterbalance some of the effects of climate change. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen into the atmosphere through photosynthesis. Much of the carbon is stored in the trees and soil and in the long-term forest products when the trees are harvested. High intensity wildfires release much of the stored carbon back into the atmosphere. High intensity megafires are generating far more carbon dioxide than many other sources. For example, by September 2020, wildland fires in California alone had generated 91 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, 25% more than California's annual emissions from fossil fuels.
6. Support rapid post-fire rehabilitation and long-term recovery through rapid harvest of forest products, where appropriate, and promote reforestation of burned over lands with

the proper species and densities for the site. Facilities that produce forest products (sawmills, biomass and slash/bark treatment facilities, etc.) need to be located strategically in relation to recent large burns to ensure success of these efforts. Rangelands should be seeded, also where appropriate, with species mixes prescribed to the site to speed recovery and attempt to get ahead of undesirable annual species. Initial efforts should be to protect the burned area from further damage through erosion, invasion of undesirable species, and negative impacts of fire suppression and related surface disturbing activities. Longer term recovery efforts may go on for several years and require follow up treatments to be effective. This will require a commitment of resources; however, failure to follow through post-fire sets the landscape up for future severe fires by leaving excessive biomass fuel on the landscape.

7. Support the use of alternative funding sources such as Forest Resiliency Bonds currently being used in California and by the U.S. Forest Service to fund forest resiliency projects using the financial markets and private capital.
8. Land managers should capitalize on every opportunity at the state, county, and city level to discuss the new realities of fire frequency and intensity; the need for collaborative wildfire planning in community development; and the urgency for proactive protection of infrastructure and roads/highways.

Approved: January 2022