

FACT SHEET



United States
Department of
Interior

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Healthy Forests Initiative Fact Sheet

The 2002 fire season was one of the worst in modern history. More than 7.2 million acres burned last year – more than twice the annual 10-year average. These fires caused the death of 21 firefighters, drove tens of thousands of people from their homes and destroyed more than 2,000 buildings. These fires also destroyed hundreds of millions of trees, devastated habitat and severely damaged forest soils and watersheds.

Despite record levels of federal support for firefighting, efforts to tackle the root cause of these fires through active forest management are too often hindered by unnecessary procedural delays and litigation. More than 190 million acres of public lands are at risk from extreme fire due to severe drought conditions, the build-up of hazardous fuels and inefficient regulatory processes. To allow vital forest health projects to move forward before the 2003 fire season, the Bush Administration is finalizing or proposing the following administrative reforms:

NEPA Categorical Exclusion - Categorical exclusions are an existing tool provided for under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that have been used for decades on a broad range of land management activities. New categorical exclusion procedures are now available under NEPA that allow priority fuel treatments (thinning and planned burns) and forest restoration (reseeding and planting) projects to proceed without the need for further individual analyses and lengthier documentation. The agencies conducted analysis for the categories of actions, including reviewing nearly 2500 fuel reduction projects for effects on water, air, wildlife and other environmental resources. The agencies found forest health, particularly wildlife habitat, significantly improved after reducing fuel loads, and that threats to air and water quality caused by fire were reduced. The new procedures require experts to identify fuels treatment projects in collaboration with state, local and tribal governments, landowners and other stakeholders.

Forest Service Appeal Rule Amendment – This action amends rules for project appeals to hasten the process of reviewing vital forest health projects. Early and meaningful public participation in the decision-making process benefits communities. It also makes the appeals process less cumbersome. Ultimately, this step results in more timely project decisions and implementation.

Department of Interior Appeal Rule Amendment – This action amends appeals rules to give highest priority to appeals involving fuels treatment projects and puts appeals board on a strict schedule to resolve them. The rule changes also require those appealing a project to have raised the objection that is the subject of the appeal during the public comment period on the project.

These common sense changes recognize both the time-sensitive nature of fuels treatment projects and the importance of receiving public input early in the decision-making process.

Improve the Endangered Species Act – A proposed rule for the Departments of Interior and Commerce soliciting public review and comment on an alternative consultation process under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for forest management projects within the scope of the National Fire Plan has been drafted. This proposal should significantly accelerate review and implementation of habitat management and ecosystem restoration activities while at the same time maintaining protections for threatened and endangered species. The alternative consultation process will eliminate the need to conduct informal consultation on actions determined “not likely to adversely affect” any listed species or designated critical habitat.

The Department of the Interior and the USDA Forest Service continue to implement the Council on Environmental Quality’s guidance intended to establish an improved and focused process for conducting environmental assessments. Fifteen pilot fuels treatment projects using the guidance are expected to be completed this summer.

Congress has also acted on the President’s call for legislation to expedite the removal of hazardous fuels and to reduce the risks of catastrophic wildfires to communities, municipal water supplies and other at-risk landscapes. This past February Congress passed, and the President signed, long-term authority for the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to use stewardship contracts to do fuels treatment work. On Tuesday, May 21, the House of Representatives passed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 by a vote of 256 to 170.

All together, these actions will reduce unnecessary red tape and needless delays that have delayed efforts to reduce the threat devastating wildfires and insect infestations that damage both public and private lands.

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