

HOLY SMOKES: A RETURN TO BASICS FOR FEDERAL FIRE POLICY

Introduction

This is a response to the draft "Federal Wildland Fire Policy & Program Review" and the call to action issued by Secretary Babbitt in his essay, *To Take Up the Torch*. The National Park Service contends that the tools to return flame to its rightful place on the landscape are already available to us. A fundamental change, however, in the way federal land management agencies look at fire will be needed in order to effectively use them.

The death of 34 firefighters during the course of the 1994 fire season focused attention on federal wildland fire management policy. A number of committees, work groups, and individuals have prepared numerous reports outlining proposals intended to prevent the loss of life experienced in 1994, including the draft "Federal Wildland Fire Policy & Program Review."

However, the policy revisions detailed in the policy and program review do not significantly change how we conduct fire management activities. It does do a good job of suggesting better procedures to implement the same policies, as in the preparedness and suppression discussion section which focuses on keeping fires small and putting them out fast - the 10 am policy restated. An increased suppression response - more retardant aircraft or crews - is not the solution. We believe that reengineering fire management policies should result in changes that provide land managers with improved fire management applications and strategies to achieve land and resource management objectives while satisfying protection needs.

The extensive and critical need for fire in fire-dependent ecosystems, as a result of fire exclusion, cannot realistically be accomplished exclusively through the use of management-ignited prescribed fire. The judicious use of the array of fire management strategies, already available to us, can accomplish protection and resource management objectives while greatly contributing to rectifying the need for fire in the fire-dependent environments.

Background

Why do we suppress fires? Suppression of fire is simply an action to achieve an end result, not a product in itself. It is a process to achieve a stated objective. The Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs are land managing agencies with fire management responsibilities - not fire protection agencies. Their responsibilities are to accomplish agency-specific land use and resource management objectives while protecting human life and values identified by Congress and the American Public. Fire management is a program that assists land managers with accomplishing land use and resource objectives. Suppression is merely one facet of fire management.

Fire management policy has continually evolved from the single focus of fire exclusion (10 am policy), to one that recognizes the role of fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent. This evolution, however, has resulted in three categories of fire with different management objectives, policies, operational requirements, funding sources, and qualifications and standards. This categorization results in confusion and lack of understanding by the general public, land managers and even fire managers. It also creates a more complicated budgetary process, and unnecessary constraints that have hindered accomplishing land use and resource management objectives. How a fire is classified triggers different actions, operational and management stipulations, funding sources, costs and qualifications of assigned personnel, yet the ecological consequences and risks may be identical.

Firefighter Safety as a Critical Component of Federal Policy

The National Park Service believes that the federal policy should state the following: "Once human resources have been committed to a fire incident, these resources become the highest value at risk and receive the highest management consideration."

If the premise that firefighters are the highest value-at-risk is accepted, then this should lead us to viewing and conducting management actions differently than in the past. No resource or property is worth the loss of life.

Proposed Policy Alternative

The National Park Service proposes that the wildfire and prescribed fire categories be combined into one category, "wildland fire."

The proposed federal policy would read:

"Management actions taken will be consistent with firefighter and public health and safety, land use plan objectives, resource benefits, values at risk and consider both short and long-term costs. Fire will be used to protect, maintain and enhance resources. Fire will be allowed to function, as nearly as possible, in its natural ecological role. All actions will be based on an approved fire management plan."

FIRE IS FIRE! Management action on all fires should be selected after all factors are considered including long term cost savings and resource benefits. No distinction will be made between natural and human-caused ignition.

Current policy restricts fire managers to only considering part of the equation. This is comparable to asking a doctor to prescribe treatment while considering some of the symptoms and available knowledge. When an ignition starts a wildland fire, the appropriate management action should be determined based upon threats to the identified values to be protected and land

and resource management objectives. This would eliminate the confusion that currently exists within the fire management community, land managers and the general public concerning the classification and difference between fires.

This approach does not mean that land and fire managers wait until a fire starts to determine the appropriate suppression action. Preplanning between federal, state, tribal and local land and fire managers across agency boundaries can determine areas where different strategies will be applied before a fire starts. This has been accomplished successfully for the 375 million acres in the state of Alaska. This change in policy would require the land managers to be more involved in the planning process and fire management activities.

This proposal does not reduce protection standards or needs identified by the land managers/owners. Each land manager/owner determines the values to be protected on their lands. Clearly, immediate aggressive initial attack and full suppression is required in many locations due to human habitation, development and commodity resources. There are areas, however, where once protection of identified values is accomplished, a different fire management strategy can be selected to meet land and resource objectives, reduce cost, and minimize the use of fire suppression resources, thereby, releasing resources to respond to higher priorities. Most human-caused fire will still require suppression; however, if a human-caused fire starts in an area slated for a management-ignited fire and conditions are within prescription, the ignition could be accepted to accomplish management objectives.

This proposal simplifies the budgetary process and reduces administrative costs by eliminating the need to maintain two separate funding and budgetary mechanisms. It also simplifies determining total costs of the agency and national fire management programs while freeing fire managers from unnecessary, time consuming budgetary activities.

This proposal also allows fire staffs and land managers to consider the long term cost and ecological benefits. Currently, only short term cost savings can be considered on wildfires. Conventional wisdom accepts that suppressing fires immediately is most cost-effective. However, this fails to recognize possibility that in some areas where values at risk did not warrant immediate suppression, the long-term suppression costs would be less if the fires were allowed to burn. Short-term savings have resulted in overall higher suppression costs because numerous fires are suppressed within an area that are ultimately burned by a single or several fires over time.

By eliminating the distinction between wildfire and prescribed fire, all wildland fires would be considered in national and regional intelligence reports, and all fire resource needs would be identified for prioritizing. More fire resources would be available for initial response and for reassignment to higher protection needs once protection objectives are met.

Needed Actions

The proposed policy can be implemented immediately without significant costs and with existing technologies and practices. It does require land and fire managers to use existing technologies proactively and apply existing fire suppression/management strategies more selectively.

The DOI Prevention Analysis should be incorporated into planning efforts to identify areas where prevention programs can be started or increased to reduce human-caused fires. The program also identifies areas where other mitigative measures such as burying power lines or vegetation manipulation through mechanical or management-ignited prescribed burns can reduce fire potential or hazards. It is also a tool to assist land and fire managers with preplanning responses to fire starts. This requires initial up-front expenditures which are extremely low when compared to recent suppression costs. New fire growth and ecological models are available to assist with predicting fire behavior and ecological changes as a result of fire. We need to utilize what has been learned through the Prescribed Natural Fire program to assist with determining which fires can be safely managed using a containment or confinement strategy.

Conclusions

This proposals realizes an opportunity to reinvent how we do business by a relatively simple change in policy. The long road of evolution in fire management policy is paved with excellent work by a number of people. We can continue to make minor corrections and modifications or we can synthesis what we have learned over the years and make a fundamental change which incorporates existing technologies and knowledge, and recognizes the changing economical and political landscape. It simplifies how we do business; focuses on fire fighter safety, enables land and fire managers to consider all factors in determining the appropriate fire management action; is easier to explain to the general public, land and fire managers and politicians; recognizes resource benefits, considers short and long-term cost effectiveness and benefits; necessitates planning across agency boundaries; improves use of fire management resources; and encourages fire management personnel to expand their individual expertise.

This proposal is a logical progression and synthesis of the ideas that have evolved. The goal of the federal fire management programs is not the number of fires suppressed or the number of acres burned by Prescribed Natural Fire. The goal is to accomplish land and resource management objectives, including maintaining fire in fire-dependent ecosystems, while protecting human life and identified values. This proposed policy change enables us to more efficiently and effectively accomplish this goal while unequivocally satisfying the eight guiding principles set forth in the Draft Federal Wildland Fire Management - Policy & Program Review.