



Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

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Strategic Fire Management Plans Are Needed to Reduce Firefighter Risks, Limit Taxpayer Costs, and Avoid Resource Damages Caused by Blindly Fighting All Fires

Recent policy changes in federal fire management could significantly alter the way agencies manage wildfires. According to the new policy, every wildfire must receive the Appropriate Management Response (AMR). These responses can vary from aggressive suppression to contain and control fires to monitoring actions that enable some fires to burn more acres in order to reduce hazardous fuel loads and restore fire-dependent ecosystems. Managers can also mix suppression and monitoring actions on the same wildfire to achieve both community protection and ecosystem restoration goals. This new policy holds tremendous promise to reduce the risks to firefighters, costs to taxpayers, and damages to natural resources by wisely managing rather than blindly fighting all fires.

The problem is that the U.S. Forest Service will in most cases be unable to take advantage of the new AMR policy because the Bush Administration has systematically neglected pre-fire planning. Without adequate Fire Management Plans (FMPs), fire managers cannot determine what would be the most fiscally or ecologically appropriate response to a given wildfire, and cannot use the important tool of Wildland Fire Use. The Bush Administration has even removed FMPs from six National Forests located in California, Arizona, and New Mexico in order to escape federal court rulings that determined Forest Service FMPs violate the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Without any FMP at all, managers are compelled to aggressively suppress all fires no matter what the risks, costs, or impacts of firefighting.

FMPs provide strategic guidance that improves firefighter safety, and management efficiency and effectiveness. FMPs also provide strategic direction for hazardous fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration projects. According to the Federal Wildland Fire Policy, every area with burnable vegetation must have an approved FMP that addresses all potential wildfire occurrences and includes the full range of fire management actions. The Ten-Year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy, and the Forest Service's Manual and Handbook also require FMPs. FMPs must also comply with NEPA, and be developed with the best available science and informed public involvement.

Many people wrongly view all wildfires as "disasters," but in fact, when they are properly managed wildfires can provide a number of social and ecological benefits. However, wildfires can and do have disastrous effects if agencies have not adequately planned or prepared for the ignitions that we know will occur every year. For those people who do believe wildfires are, by definition, disasters, what sense does it make to neglect pre-disaster planning—or in the case of the Bush Administration, to withdraw plans entirely? This neglect of strategic pre-fire planning and preparedness must be turned around and given the proper focus and support needed to do the job right.

The bottom line: the U.S. Forest Service has not developed FMPs that utilize the best available fire ecology science, include a full range of AMR options, involve informed public and community input, comply with environmental laws, or adequately address the growing challenges to fire management from the combination of climate change, urban sprawl, and invasive weeds. It is clear that Congress is going to have to direct the next Administration to devote more funding, staff, and leadership support to develop high-quality FMPs that fully comply with the law, provide strategic guidance for selecting the AMR to future fires in specific places, and meet the critical challenges ahead of wisely *managing* instead of blindly "fighting" all fires.

Fire Management Plans Provide Multiple Benefits

- **Fire Management Plans Reduce Safety Hazards for Wildland Firefighters**

Firefighting is inherently hazardous duty that puts the health and safety of firefighters at risk. Without FMPs, agencies are compelled to aggressively fight wildfires even in areas where the risks of fire to human communities are low, the ecological benefits of burning are high, and the hazards to firefighters may be extreme. FMPs would help avoid unnecessary suppression actions and guide selection of the AMR that would maximize the benefits of burned acres while minimizing the risks and hazards to firefighters.

- **Fire Management Plans Reduce Suppression Costs for Taxpayers**

FMPs can reduce suppression costs by focusing firefighting actions to the times and places it is most safe, effective, and necessary. FMPs can also reduce suppression costs by setting the strategic plan for hazardous fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration projects that are ultimately the only viable, long-term solution for reducing the adverse effects of severe wildfires. Forest Service studies have revealed that for every dollar spent on fire preparedness, it saves up to seven dollars in emergency fire suppression costs.

- **Fire Management Plans Decrease Suppression Damages to Ecosystems**

FMPs can prohibit certain suppression methods in areas where they would be most destructive to the natural environment (e.g. running bulldozers in roadless areas, dumping toxic chemical retardants in riparian areas). In many cases, the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts of fire suppression are more significant and enduring than the effects of wildfire alone. FMPs can help determine what would be the ecologically appropriate response to wildfires and avoid unnecessarily excessive damage to ecosystems and natural resources that, in turn, increases the costs of fire rehabilitation projects needed to mitigate the damage caused by fighting fires.

- **Fire Management Plans Increase Effectiveness of Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration Projects**

FMPs provide ecological data needed to locate where fires historically ignited and burned, and assess where hazardous fuel loads have accumulated due to past fire exclusion. FMPs can develop strategic direction and a comprehensive plan for locating and designing specific projects to reduce fuels and restore fire processes in ways that offer the most “bang for the buck.” When FMPs are developed with NEPA processes that include cumulative effects analysis, then individual fuels reduction and forest restoration projects using prescribed fire are ready to go when conditions permit, instead of laboring through NEPA processes for each and every prescribed fire project.

For more information about the new Appropriate Management Response (AMR) policy and its relationship to Fire Management Plans (FMPs) contact Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) or go to the Current Issues section of our website, www.fusee.org