



Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

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Forest Service Withdraws Six Rivers' Fire Management Plan Legal Ploy Puts Local Communities and Natural Resources at Risk

EUGENE, OR: Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) released a statement on June 1, 2006 condemning the Bush Administration for ordering the withdrawal of the Six Rivers National Forest's Fire Management Plan (FMP). The Forest Service's unprecedented move was in response to a federal judge's recent decision that ordered the agency to conduct environmental analysis and public input in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in the Six Rivers' FMP.

"This legal maneuver to evade a court's order to include public involvement in fire planning puts wildland firefighters, local communities, and natural resources at great risk," said Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE). "Without careful planning and preparation for future wildland fires, the Forest Service will be forced to blindly fight all fires at all times at all costs."

The Environmental Protection Information Center and American Lands Alliance filed the lawsuit in November, 2002 and on April 6, 2006 Federal District Judge Joseph C. Spero ruled that the Six Rivers National Forest must prepare an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment for its FMP. Judge Spero gave the agency 26 months to comply with his order, but in an attempt to "moot" the court's order, the Forest Service announced on May 24, 2006 that it had completely withdrawn the Six Rivers' FMP. Department of Agriculture officials are now deciding whether or not there should be a fire plan for the Six Rivers National Forest in the future.

"The court has determined that citizens have a legal right to participate as partners in fire planning on public lands, and Forest Service officials responded with the "nuclear option" that eliminated all fire planning on the Six Rivers National Forest! There is not a fire management officer in the country who would support this crazy bureaucratic reaction, especially just before fire season is about to begin," said Timothy Ingalsbee of FUSEE. "This is one of the more disturbing examples of the Bush Administration's general fear of using the best available science and informed public input in governmental affairs."

The Six Rivers' Forest Supervisor, California Regional Forester, and Forest Service Chief all signed official memorandums on May 24, 2006 giving the Six Rivers a special waiver from federal policy directives requiring FMPs. According to the Federal Wildland Fire

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Management Policy, Ten-Year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy, National Fire Plan, and the Forest Service's own Manual, all acres of federal land containing burnable vegetation must have a current, approved FMP. The Six Rivers is now the only National Forest in the nation to lack a FMP, and is the first one to ever entirely withdraw a completed FMP.

The California Attorney General's Office filed a similar lawsuit against the Forest Service, arguing that the Sequoia National Monument's FMP failed to include environmental analysis and public input in compliance with NEPA. The court has ruled that the Forest Service violated the law, but has yet to decide a remedy in that case. Conservationists are concerned that the Bush Administration may decide to withdraw the Sequoia's FMP, too, in order to avoid a possible court order requiring a NEPA process for the FMP.

Large portions of the Six Rivers National Forest were burned by the 1999 Big Bar Fire and the 2002 Biscuit Fire, the largest wildfires in the nation during those years. In both incidents, Forest Service internal reviews determined that the lack of an adequate FMP contributed to the large size and high suppression costs of those wildfires.

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