



Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

PO Box 51016, Eugene, OR 97405 (541)302-6218 info@fusee.org www.fusee.org

Press Statement by Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of FUSEE on June 1, 2006:

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) condemns the decision by the U.S. Forest Service to withdraw the Six Rivers National Forest's Fire Management Plan (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, for 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.

After years of legal argumentation and consideration, the court has determined that citizens have a legal right to participate as partners in fire planning on public lands. In fact, Forest Service fire managers would benefit from gaining local citizens' knowledge of forest conditions, special places, and the values at risk from unwanted severe wildfire. Citizens can also help supply fire managers with copies of the latest scientific research publications on wildland fire. Likewise, members of the public would benefit from the agency's analysis of the tradeoffs in safety risks, economic costs, and environmental impacts from a range of alternative fire management strategies and tactics. However, in order to evade this legal obligation, 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 in the Pacific Northwest.

This cynical legal maneuver 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. It reverses over a decade of progress in federal fire policy. The 1995 and 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, the 2001 Ten-Year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy, the National Fire Plan, and the Forest Service's own Manual all require FMPs for every area containing burnable vegetation on each National Forest. Without an approved, completed FMP, the Six Rivers has no option other than aggressive emergency suppression on all wildland fires. Consequently, opportunities to manage wildland fire use fires for social and ecological benefits, to minimize suppression costs and impacts, and to maximize safety for firefighters and communities by conducting proactive prescribed fire and other fuels management actions are eliminated by default.

It is not even clear whether or not the Six Rivers' fire management program can properly function without a FMP or some other kind of pre-fire planning. Without the strategic guidance offered by an FMP, fire management staff are relegated to "flying by the seat of their fire pants" in deciding how to deal with future wildland fire events and issues. This puts an unacceptable burden of responsibility on individual staff members, and further

removes agency actions from public accountability by subjecting all future fire management actions to the potential whims of individual land managers.

According to the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Policy,

"Every area with burnable vegetation must have an approved Fire Management Plan (FMPs). FMPs are strategic plans that define a program to manage wildland and prescribed fires based on the area's approved land management plan. FMPs must provide for firefighter and public safety; include fire management strategies, tactics, and alternatives; address values to be protected and public health issues; and be consistent with resource management objectives, activities of the area, and environmental laws and regulations. FMPs and programs will be based on a foundation of sound science." (2001 Federal Fire Policy, pg. 23)

The Forest Service had a major role in developing the Federal Fire Policy, and now it refuses to abide by this policy. This retrograde move threatens to roll back the agency to the "dark ages" of fire policy in which the agency had to contain and control all fires by 10:00am. Today it is the Six Rivers, tomorrow it could be the Sequoia National Forest, and in the future other National Forests could lose their FMPs as the Bush Administration flaunts legal duties, policy directives, and simple common sense that all require careful pre-fire planning.

After considerable investment of taxpayer resources in developing FMPs, the Forest Service must not be allowed to cavalierly reverse national fire policy direction, ignore legal obligations, or abandon management opportunities to prepare collaborative fire plans with informed public involvement. If the federal courts cannot stop this extremist self-destructive action, it is up to Congress to compel the agency to develop FMPs that fully comply with NEPA and fully implement Federal Fire Policies.