

Storm Recovery - Questions and Answers

Q. WHY ISN'T FUEL TREATMENT WORK BEING DONE FASTER?

- We're using all of the tools available to us to expedite fuel treatment work. In our initial fuel reduction work, we amended existing timber sale contracts to add blowdown units and received approval through CEQ for alternative arrangements for high-priority work. During the NEPA process, we received a Chief's exemption from stay during appeal that was also for high-priority work. Our fuel reduction work followed a strategy of treating fuel adjacent to homes and resorts first. After that, we have been treating fuels progressively farther from those homes. This allows a measure of protection near dwellings before we ignite large prescribed burns.
- Additionally, we are completing pre-ignition, on-ground planning and further modeling for the large, complex prescribed fires in the BWCAW to ensure safe and effective burns.

Q. WHY DOESN'T THE FOREST SERVICE LET NATURAL PROCESSES CARRY ON WITHOUT ANY FUEL REDUCTION PROJECTS?

- The Forest Service conducted a fuel risk analysis. It demonstrated that as fuels dry out, there would be a very good chance of a large uncontrollable wildfire endangering the lives of people traveling through, or homes and lives of people living adjacent to the BWCAW. Leaving fuels untreated poses an unacceptable risk.

Q. WHY DOESN'T THE FOREST SERVICE PURSUE SALVAGE LOGGING IN THE BWCAW?

- Logging is not currently permitted under existing laws and regulations.
- If the laws were changed to permit logging, the BWCAW is currently inaccessible due to the many lakes and streams. Access necessary to conduct logging would permanently alter the character of the Wilderness and the cost of the road system would greatly exceed the value of the timber removed.
- Logging generally only removes the larger portions of trees and, in many areas, there would still be a need to use prescribed burning to remove the slash left behind (secondary prescribed burn treatments are planned for harvest in many units outside the Wilderness).
- The Forest Service has elected to use fire as the only management tool in the BWCAW. Fire is a natural wilderness component and will accomplish the necessary fuel treatment, minimize the long-term impacts to the wilderness character, and be the most cost efficient.
- Logging within the Wilderness would leave long-lasting impacts that may negatively affect the recreational experience of visitors and ultimately impact the tourism economy.

Q. WHY CAN'T THE FOREST SERVICE OBTAIN SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS FROM THE COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY (CEQ) TO EXPEDITE THE REST OF THE FUEL TREATMENT PROGRAM?

- The Forest Service requested and received approval to reduce fuels through alternative arrangements from CEQ for the fuels posing the highest risk to home and resort owners, which accomplished the first stages of our fuel reduction strategy.

- Treatment of the BWCAW could not take place until we completed the environmental analysis of treatment and provided the appropriate fuels buffer outside the Wilderness. Analyses for treatment outside the Wilderness was not completed until the end of 2000; therefore, we allowed the BWCAW EIS to take a normal schedule to complete and allow for implementation to begin in Fall 2001.
- Since the BWCAW is a complex area for which we have little resource data, a full analysis was required to provide information for a better-informed decision on fuel reduction treatments.

Q. WHY ISN'T THE FOREST SERVICE DOING LESS/MORE PRESCRIBED BURNING VERSUS MECHANICAL TREATMENT OUTSIDE THE BWCAW?

- The Forest Service carefully reviewed all blowdown areas outside the BWCAW and completed mechanical work where it feasibly fits on the land. Windows of opportunity with the proper burning conditions are often small. Mechanical operations can be carried out under a much wider set of environmental conditions, helping us meet the objective of reducing the fuels in an expedited manner. Sometimes, burning may still be needed, but the mechanical operations can create much safer burning conditions.
- Mechanical operations are not feasible or desirable in some locations. Steep rocky slopes or broad wetlands make product removal too expensive, too dangerous, or too difficult. On other sites, several factors added together that led to burning as the more desirable option.

Q. WHY DOESN'T THE FOREST SERVICE ALLOW LESS/MORE MANAGED WILDFIRE THAN PLANNED?

- Our current knowledge of wildfire management in a wilderness area assumes burning conditions created by standing timber. We need to plan for a large number of elements ahead of natural ignition; since the blowdown is a new factor with unknowns, we do not feel comfortable using wildfire as the sole management tool in the blowdown.
- As time goes on, we may again factor natural wildfire as a management tool in the Wilderness. Prescribed burning in the BWCAW will break up continuous fuel, allowing more wildland fire use.

Q. HOW CAN THE FOREST SERVICE GUARANTEE THAT PRESCRIBED FIRE WILL BE CARRIED OUT WITHIN AN ACCEPTABLE RISK LEVEL?

- Prescribed burn plans are prepared by experienced and qualified personnel and reviewed by qualified line officers.
- Several factors are evaluated in preparing a prescribed burn plan, including weather, fuels, topography, and the firefighting tools available. A plan considers barriers and standards for control lines, ignition patterns and techniques, potential holding problems, and contingencies in the event the fire crosses the control lines.
- On the day of a planned prescribed burn, several factors are considered before the fire is set, including present and expected weather, fuel conditions, other fire activities in the area and nation, and available support resources.

- No burn can be absolutely guaranteed to stay under control. However, in the case of the blowdown, the alternative of not using prescribed burning to reduce fuels is a much higher chance for a wildfire beyond our control.
- From our analysis, a fire set under specified conditions with controlled lighting techniques and predetermined control measures in place is a more acceptable risk than an unplanned wildfire.

Q. IS THE FOREST SERVICE UNNECESSARILY SCARING THE PUBLIC AND AFFECTING TOURISM REGARDING BLOWDOWN RISKS? HAS THE FOREST SERVICE BEEN AGGRESSIVE ENOUGH WITH MESSAGES ABOUT BLOWDOWN RISKS?

- *The Fuels Risk Assessment* clearly identified a higher risk of fire in the blowdown where fuel loads are up to four times the pre-blowdown volume. Fires can start easier, spread quicker, and become difficult to control in blowdown. Records indicate that 41 percent of BWCAW wildfires were human-caused, primarily by escaped campfires. Over 80 percent of wildfires outside the BWCAW on the Forest are human-caused. Besides the fire potential, the blowdown left large numbers of “spring pole” trees and leaning trees, which can kill people. The Forest has consulted with outfitters, resort owners, the Office of Tourism, the Department of Public Safety, and other key contacts in developing balanced safety messages and restrictions. These key contacts have also assisted in delivering messages regarding risks and restrictions.

Q. SHOULD VISITOR USE IN THE ENTIRE BWCAW BE RESTRICTED THROUGH THE ENTIRE SEASON?

- The Forest determined that restrictions should be based on blowdown-related fire danger and not on arbitrary lines on the map or arbitrary dates. This was based on internal and external scoping. The Forest evaluated the pros and cons of alternatives. The selected approach does not unnecessarily restrict uses in areas that were not affected by the blowdown and it allows for different levels of use during the season based on conditions. However, all parties agreed that the selected alternative would not include “on and off” restrictions changing day-to-day; rather, restrictions would be based on trends in fire weather and conditions in the blowdown.

Q. ARE LONG-TERM ECOSYSTEM IMPACTS OF PROPOSED RECOVERY PROJECTS AND THE IMPACTS OF THE BLOWDOWN BEING CONSIDERED?

- Analysis of all projects include long-term effects. Each project analysis has given us the chance to review and compare the effects of various proposals against the potential wildfire if we were to do nothing.
- Analysis was integrated into cumulative effects analysis and Forest Plan revision. Many efforts maximize research and educational opportunities. The Forest is also a partner with the University of Minnesota for research on natural disturbance regimes.