

PANEL DISCUSSION: Barriers to Fuel Management

One of the traditional roles that prescribed fire has played in the fire management arena is reduction of hazardous fuel buildups under controlled, well-defined environmental conditions. However, our ability to use this tool effectively is blocked by many barriers. The preceding panel discussion about the causes of limited success in implementing prescribed burning programs addressed some of the barriers encountered by various types of governmental agencies. This panel discussion focussed on three specific barriers to implementing fuel management programs incorporating prescribed burning.

Mr. Kenneth Blonski of the USDA Forest Service described organizational barriers to implementation. Although the specific examples are linked to the Forest Service, many of the same barriers exist in other organizations. Ms. Anita Ruud of the U.S. Office of the General Counsel described legal barriers, particularly those related to liability issues. Federal disaster assistance programs are viewed by some as disincentives to proactive hazard reduction programs. Mr. William Patterson addressed this issue and described new Federal assistance programs. The following three papers summarize the comments of the panel.

Organizational Barriers to Fuel Management¹

Kenneth S. Blonski²

Numerous obstacles to fuels management, such as limited funding and inadequate staffing, result from programmatic conflict within the fire management mission of the USDA Forest Service. Traditional focus on fire suppression and the political realities of an extremely competitive climate for available public funds underlie this situation. As the Forest Service shifts its focus to the holistic concept of ecosystem management that includes fire and fuels management, agency leaders and resource managers

may develop an economic basis for that strategy. Developing a sustained management strategy that embraces and enhances the fire-prone wildlands requires protection from the erratic, political winds of change. The rhetoric of politically correct environmental policy must be tempered with a realistic view of the traditional fire suppression mission. Successful future fuel management strategies must complement protection needs and provide a smooth transition to sustained ecosystem management.

¹An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the Biswell Symposium: Fire Issues and Solutions in Urban Interface and Wildland Ecosystems, February 15-17, 1994, Walnut Creek, California.

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