

Regional Interagency Executive Committee

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Memorandum

Date: July 31, 2003

To: Regional Interagency Executive Committee (RIEC) (See attached distribution list.)

From: /s/ Elaine M. Brong, Chair

Subject: Exception to Survey and Manage pre-disturbance survey requirements for wildland fire for resource benefits

Purpose: The purpose of this memorandum is to document an exception to pre-disturbance survey requirements for wildland fires for resource benefits outside of designated Wilderness.

Background: The use of wildland fire burning within prescribed parameters is one tool to meet ecosystem management needs. The type of prescriptions that meet these goals typically result in longer term habitat maintenance, and reduce the risk of a larger scale more intense fire. Due to the timing of wildland fires, they can be used to mimic historic disturbance patterns, sizes, and intensities. Also, appropriate use of wildland fire as a management tool may help reduce overall suppression costs. However, the use of wildland fire may be limited due to fuel loadings, the proximity of the natural ignition to Wildland Urban Interface areas, and the ability to burn within prescription.

Recently, several field units asked to pursue a process described in the 2001 Survey and Manage Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs) to except field units from the pre-disturbance survey requirement for wildland fires for resource benefits in land allocations other than designated Wilderness.

Analysis: The S&Gs specifically address the issue of wildland fires for resource benefits in designated Wilderness:

“Pre-disturbance surveys are not required for wildland fires for resource benefits in designated Wilderness. Wildland fires for resource benefits are prescribed fires that result from natural ignition, are consistent with the applicable land and resource management plan, are addressed in a fire management plan, and are burning within prescription. Even though prescriptions are written well in advance of the burn, pre-disturbance surveys are not required...” (S&Gs, p. 22)

For wildland fire starts outside of Wilderness, exceptions to the pre-disturbance survey requirement are shown as subject to REO review (S&Gs, p. 22). In a memo dated May 16, 2003, the RIEC delegated the authority to review exceptions to pre-disturbance surveys from the REO to the Survey and Manage Intermediate Managers Group (IMG). On July 9, 2003, the IMG discussed the use of wildland fire for resource benefits and reviewed a potential exception to the pre-disturbance survey requirement. The IMG determined that if the same conditions as applied to Wilderness are met in other land allocations, then pre-disturbance surveys in those land allocations prior to a wildland fire for resource benefits should not be required.

Conclusion: No pre-disturbance surveys are required for wildland fires for resource benefits, regardless of land allocation, if the following conditions are met. No further REO or IMG review is required prior to implementation.

1. The fire is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest or District Plan).
2. A fire management plan has been developed that addresses wildland fire starts and appropriate prescriptions for the area.
3. The fire is burning within prescription, and the prescription is designed for resource benefits. (Note: A prescription designed for resource benefits provides for an adequate level of structural components such as snags, coarse woody debris, litter/duff, and mid and overstory canopy. Typically, the fire has a low to moderate rate of spread and flame lengths less than 4-6 feet.)
4. In Late-Successional Reserves (LSRs) only:
 - a. The LSR Assessment, supplement to the LSR Assessment, or other large-scale analysis addresses the potential presence and likely effect on Survey and Manage species.
 - b. The Forest Supervisor or District Manager review of the LSR Assessment (and/or other documentation noted in 4.a., above) concludes that such fires will not prevent achievement of the persistence objectives of the S&Gs.

On July 11, 2003, the RIEC Survey and Manage Subcommittee reviewed and concurred with the IMG exception, and requested that the RIEC Chair provide this information to all RIEC members to facilitate implementation. All RIEC executives are encouraged to distribute this memorandum to appropriate individuals in their agency. In addition, the IMG is advised that this memorandum constitutes an amendment to the May 16, 2003 delegation of authority for Survey and Manage related reviews.

Contact: If you have questions or need additional information, please contact Jay Watson, Regional Ecosystem Office Representative, 503-808-2178; or Terry Brumley, Interagency Survey and Manage Program Manager, tbrumley@fs.fed.us, 503-808-2968.

cc: Anne Badgley, REO Executive Director
REO Representatives
Neal Middlebrook, Chair, Survey and Manage IMG
Terry Brumley, Interagency Survey and Manage Program Manager

Attachment:

“Excerpt from 2001 Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines” (1 pp.)

RIEC Distribution List

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4

Excerpt from *2001 Record of Decision and Standards and Guidelines for Amendments to the Survey and Manage, Protection Buffer, and other Mitigation Measures Standards and Guidelines:*

“Survey and Manage and other Mitigation Measures

Habitat-Disturbing Activities

Habitat-disturbing activities are defined as those disturbances likely to have a significant negative impact on the species’ habitat, its life cycle, microclimate, or life support requirements. The evaluation of the scale, scope, and intensity of the anticipated negative impact of the project on habitat or life requirements should include an assessment of the type, timing, and intensity of the disturbing activity. “Habitat-disturbing” is not necessarily the same as “ground-disturbing”; helicopter logging or logging over snow-pack, for example, may not disturb the ground but might clearly affect microclimate or life cycle habitat factors. Conversely, an activity having soil-disturbing effects might not have a large enough scope to trigger a need to survey. Such a case would be the installation of a signpost within a campground. Routine maintenance of improvements and existing structures are not considered a habitat-disturbing activity. Examples of routine maintenance include pulling ditches, clearing encroaching vegetation, managing existing seed orchards, and falling hazard trees.

The line officer should seek specialists’ recommendations to help determine the need for a survey based on site-specific information. In making such determination, the line

officer should consider the probability of the species being present on the project site, as well as the probability that the project would cause a significant negative effect on the species habitat or the persistence of the species at the site.

Pre-disturbance surveys are not required in the unusual circumstance such that a delay in implementation of the activity (to permit pre-disturbance surveys) would result in greatly increased and unacceptable environmental risk. Such circumstances are subject to review by the REO to ensure the urgency of the activity justifies the risk to species.

Pre-disturbance surveys are not required for wildland fires for resource benefits in designated Wilderness. Wildland fires for resource benefits are prescribed fires that result from natural ignition, are consistent with the applicable land and resource management plan, are addressed in a fire management plan, and are burning within prescription. Even though prescriptions are written well in advance of the burn, pre-disturbance surveys are not required because they would be impractical given the large area covered by prescriptions and the irregular nature of natural ignitions, and because potential impacts to Survey and Manage species are limited because the objective of such fires is limited to mimicking natural processes and succession (1964 Wilderness Act, Section 2(a)) (FSM 2323.32). Exceptions to the pre-disturbance survey requirement may be proposed, subject to REO review, for other wildland fires for resource benefits in backcountry, Wilderness Study Areas, roaded natural, and similar areas where the objective of such fires is similar to those in Wilderness.

Exceptions to the pre-disturbance survey requirement may also be proposed for wildland fire for resource benefits in Late-Successional Reserves if the Late-Successional Reserve Assessment addresses the potential presence and likely effect on Survey and Manage species, and REO review of that aspect of the Assessment concludes such fire(s) will not prevent achievement of the persistence objectives of these standards and guidelines.

Standards and Guidelines – 22”