

Proposed Wildland Fire Amendment to the Coronado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan

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Abstract—The Coronado National Forest proposed amending its 1986 Land and Resource Management Plan to conform to the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. This Policy emphasizes fire's essential role in maintaining natural ecosystems and allows a broader range of management options for wildland fires. Under the current Forest Plan, fires must be suppressed in areas outside of congressionally designated Wildernesses, Wilderness Study Areas, and Research Natural Areas. The proposed amendment would allow fire managers' discretionary use of a spectrum of fire management alternatives, from suppression to managing natural ignitions to achieve resource benefits throughout the Forest.

History of the Forest Service's Wildland Fire Policy

Forest Service wildland fire policy began with the 1905 *Use Book*, which provided regulations and management instructions for the National Forest Reserves. The first objective contained in the *Use Book* states, "Forest reserves are for the purpose of preserving a perpetual supply of timber..." The fire protection section further defines the need to protect the forest reserves from fire, which was "...insurance against the destruction of property, timber resources, and water supply by fire." Additionally, the *Use Book* explained how citizen fire brigades, composed of the local residents and permit holders, were organized to fight fires on forest reserves, and that fire-fighting was the priority for forest reserve employees over all other duties during fire season.

The year 1910 marked a significant event in wildland fire history when five million acres of National Forest land burned and eighty-five firefighters lost their lives (Pyne 1982). These fires helped shape the thinking that wildland fire was a destructive force and needed to be suppressed. Also, it became evident that citizen fire brigades alone could not control and extinguish such conflagrations.

Support for suppression of all wildland fires gained momentum with the 1935 10 a.m. Policy, which stated that all wildland fires would be controlled by 10 a.m. the next day. The Forest Service adhered to this policy for over forty years until it was replaced in 1979 (Pyne 1982). During the 1940s Smokey Bear was introduced as a symbol in prevention of forest fires and became a national icon with his famous slogan, "Remember, only you can prevent forest fires."

Starting in the 1970s, the Forest Service reconsidered its position on management of wildland fire. The 10 a.m. Policy was revised in 1979, which allowed an *appropriate* suppression response to wildland fires. This policy required a timely suppression response for each fire ignition with appropriate forces based on cost efficiency (Servis and Hurley 1990). Suppression

strategies ranged from direct control with minimum acreage burned, to more indirect methods of containment and confinement, which often allowed large areas to burn. Also at this time, the emerging science of fire ecology was providing new information about fire's role in shaping many ecosystems on National Forest System land (Pyne 1982).

The Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy

The unintended effects of decades of fire suppression on National Forest System land and other Federal land became increasingly evident in the 1990s. During the 1994 wildland fire season millions of acres burned and thirty-four firefighters were killed. One of the most significant fires of 1994 was the South Canyon Fire in Colorado in which fourteen Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) firefighters died. After the investigation of the fatalities, the Director of the BLM and the Chief of the Forest Service chartered an Interagency Management Review Team (Review Team) to develop a report that further addressed the concerns identified in the investigation. Their report stated that "The single-agency focus and contrasting approaches of the various [fire management planning] systems has precluded effective inter-agency planning...Fuels management, especially through the reintroduction of fire as an integral part of natural resource management, must be a high priority of the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture."

After the Review Team's report was published, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior formed an interagency working group to address the Team's recommendations and the challenges of wildland fire management, and also to create a standardized interagency wildland fire policy for all Federal land management agencies (USDA and USDI 1995). The working group developed a report to provide the foundation for interagency wildland fire management, which resulted in the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review,

commonly known as the Federal Fire Policy. The Federal Fire Policy included the following nine guiding principles to ensure consistency among Federal land management agencies (USDA and USDI 1995):

- “Firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity.
- The role of wildland fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent will be incorporated into the planning process.
- Fire management plans, programs, and activities support land and resource management plans and their implementation.
- Sound risk management is a foundation for all fire management activities.
- Fire management programs and activities are economically viable, and based upon values to be protected, costs, and land and resource management objectives.
- Fire management plans and activities are based upon the best available science.
- Fire management plans and activities incorporate public health and environmental quality considerations.
- Federal, State, Tribal, and local interagency coordination and cooperation are essential.
- Standardization of policies and procedures among federal agencies is an ongoing objective.”

Further, the Federal Fire Policy included recommendations necessary for the Federal agencies to achieve collaborative implementation of this policy. These recommendations included the need for planning and the development of Fire Management Plans for all areas with burnable vegetation. A fire management plan must be consistent with firefighter and public safety, values to be protected, and Land and Resource Management Plan direction. Additionally, it must address all fire management occurrences and include a full range of fire management actions (USDA and USDI 1995).

On May 4, 2000, the Cerro Grande Prescribed Burn was ignited at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico, but exceeded its prescription and became a wildland fire. The Cerro Grande Fire burned 18,000 acres and destroyed 235 homes (National Interagency Fire Center, Fire Investigation Team 2000). The investigation report concluded that Federal agencies had not completed all the necessary work to fully comply with the Federal Fire Policy.

The 2000 wildfire season led the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to direct the working group who had prepared the Federal Fire Policy to conduct a review of the Policy. The Secretaries asked that special attention be given to the implementation status of the Federal Fire Policy and issues raised by the Cerro Grande Investigation Report. The working group reached the following conclusions (USDA and USDI 2001):

- “The Federal Fire Policy is still generally sound and appropriate.
- As a result of fire exclusion, the condition of fire-adapted ecosystems continues to deteriorate; the fire hazard situation in these areas is worse than previously understood.
- The fire hazard in the Wildland Urban Interface is more complex and extensive than understood in 1995.

- Changes and additions to the 1995 Federal Fire Policy are needed to address important issues of ecosystem sustainability, science, education, and communication, and to provide adequate program evaluation.
- Implementation of the 1995 Federal Fire Policy has been incomplete, particularly in the quality of planning and in interagency and interdisciplinary matters.
- Emphasis on program management, implementation, oversight, leadership, and evaluation at senior levels of all federal agencies is critical for successful implementation of the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.”

Thus, the review and update report of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy resulted in the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

The Coronado National Forest Proposed Wildland Fire Amendment

The decrease in wildland fire had a destabilizing influence in many fire-adapted ecosystems, including much of the land managed by the Coronado National Forest (Forest). A lack of natural fire influences over the past century changed the character of the vegetative communities on the Forest. The natural role of fire was virtually eliminated from many vegetative communities, and the unnatural accumulation of fuels and increase in plant density left many areas at risk for uncharacteristic fire behavior. As a result, wildland fires became larger and more severe than historical fires.

Wildland fire threatens public and private land, particularly where vegetation patterns have been altered by development, land-use practices, and aggressive fire suppression. Obviously, potentially serious ecological deterioration is possible where fuel loads and tree density have become extremely high. On the Forest, these conditions clearly contributed to the severity of the recent Bullock and Aspen Fires in the Santa Catalina Mountains, and these uncharacteristic conditions elsewhere have set the stage for future large destructive fires.

In 2002 the Forest Service amended the Forest Service Handbook 5109.19, Chapter 50—Fire Management Planning, to provide direction for restoring fire-adapted ecosystems and described the format for preparing a fire management plan. The Handbook states, “Fire management plans should address as extensive as possible a range of potential wildland fire occurrences and should include the full range of fire management actions in a manner consistent with Forest land and resource management plans...Where the land and resource management plan does not support a full range of fire programs options, amending the Forest land and resource management plan may be considered by the Forest Supervisor to reflect a broader wildland fire management program.”

In December 2002, the Coronado National Forest proposed an amendment to its Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) to align it with the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Appropriate use of wildland fire on a landscape scale is needed to (1) reduce hazardous fuels and avoid catastrophic

fires, and (2) sustain wildland ecosystems. Providing for wildland fire use also broadens management discretion in the use of naturally occurring fires to meet resource management objectives already identified by the Forest LRMP. Under the proposed amendment, changes would be made to fire management direction throughout the LRMP.

The Coronado National Forest LRMP divides the Forest into the following two Fire Management Suppression Zones with differing responses:

“Fire Management Zone 1: The appropriate suppression response in this zone will be predicated upon preventing fires from reaching or damaging high value resources and improvements.

Fire Management Zone 2: The appropriate suppression response in this zone will be predicated upon responses that will suppress wildfires at the least cost with acceptable damage to improvements.”

The Coronado National Forest 2003 Fire Management Plan divides the Forest into two Fire Management Units (FMUs), based on the current LRMP direction. The two FMUs are Wildland Fire Use and Wildland Fire Suppression (USDA Forest Service 2003). The Wildland Fire Use FMU includes the following areas: Wilderness, research natural areas, and Wilderness study areas. These areas allow a full range of wildland fire responses, from aggressive initial attack to managing for resource benefits. The Wildland Fire Suppression FMU includes all other areas of the Forest, where suppression is the only appropriate management response (USDA Forest Service 2003). The delineation of Fire Management Suppression Zones would no longer exist under the proposed amendment.

Amending the LRMP would benefit the Forest in the following ways:

- Allow fire to assume a more natural role as an essential ecological process and natural change agent across a greater extent of the landscape.
- Improve habitat for native species.
- Sensitize fire managers to a more complete spectrum of resource issues.
- Provide authority for managers to implement wildland fire use in areas currently designated as wildland fire suppression.
- Educate the public about the role of fire in the ecosystem.
- Assure alignment of Forest fire management policies with Federal fire management policy.

The incorporation of this amendment into the LRMP does not suggest that a wildland fire use strategy will be implemented for every natural ignition. Wildland fire use would not be the appropriate management response under the following circumstances:

- Where threat to life, property, or resources cannot be mitigated.
- Where potential effects on cultural and natural resources are outside the range of acceptable effects.

- Where factors such as time of season, fire danger, fire size, and potential fire complexity are unacceptable to the Agency Administrator.
- Other proximate fire activity that limits or precludes successful management of the fire.
- Other Agency Administrator issues that preclude wildland fire use.

The appropriate management response for each wildland fire will vary across the Forest and will include the full spectrum of options from aggressive initial attack to managing fires. Wildland fire use, appropriately applied, is intended to restore fire’s natural role in maintaining a healthy, diverse, and resilient ecosystem, resistant to natural disturbances.

Conclusion

The frequent occurrence of fires with uncharacteristic fire behavior over the last decade has led to a significant shift in Federal wildland fire policy. The Coronado National Forest’s Proposed Wildland Fire Amendment demonstrates how the Forest has incorporated a science-based approach to wildland fire management. The integration of this amendment into the Forest’s LRMP will move management practices toward restoring natural ecosystems altered by past wildland fire management policies.

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