

# PLENARY

## WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT POLICY — LEARNING FROM THE PAST AND PRESENT AND RESPONDING TO FUTURE CHALLENGES

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### ABSTRACT

Since its origin as a defined functional activity, wildland fire management has been the natural resource management program with the highest risk, complexity, and greatest potential for serious negative outcomes. During this time, this program has continually grown in temporal and spatial extent, operational complexity, ecological significance, social, economic, and political magnitude, and seriousness of potential consequences. With this level of importance and dynamic stature, the value of a strong, accurately focused policy to guide programmatic development and implementation cannot be overstated.

**Fire Policy:** Wildland fire management policy represents a high-level course of action embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures of federal land management agencies, guides present and future decisions, and identifies procedures and means to achieve wildland fire management goals and objectives. A sound and efficient policy is built from driving factors or foundational processes that indicate a need. Such policy is composed of specific attributes or supportive processes that define exactly what it represents; and is used to guide management decisions and actions by presenting outcomes from performance and lessons learned. Historically, wildland fire management policy has been developed and modified in response to program evolution, with acceptance ranging widely from full endorsement to contentiousness and controversy. During the last 20 years, dynamic fire management issues, significant events, and increasing external awareness, scrutiny, and involvement have exerted a greater influence on policy formulation than experienced in the previous 80 years.

**Learning from the Past:** Past policy driving factors included incomplete knowledge of the natural role of fire and fire effects, economic concerns over natural resources, limited accessibility, limited organizational capability, safety concerns, and an agency perspective that less fire was better. These factors led to development of a policy characterized by attributes of full fire suppression. Over time, implementation of this policy provided lessons learned including: fire exclusion did not support all resource management objectives; serious consequences resulted from complete fire suppression; increased planning and preparedness constrained the application of fire for resource benefits; and increased preparedness improved long-term accountability.

**Understanding the Present:** Driving factors responsible for the present policy include improved state of knowledge; increased importance of community protection; improved capability; expanded interagency cooperation; wider ranging agency perspective and greater awareness of potential consequences; and escalating protection demands and expectations of success. Attributes of the present policy produce the most flexible policy to date, advocate increased use of fire for beneficial purposes, incorporate science as foundational policy element, and recognize a rapidly changing management focus to include local collaboration and population-based protection needs. Lessons learned from the present include increased knowledge of the importance of fire presence in many ecosystems; changing values associated with wildland–urban interfaces; importance of strategic and tactical decision making in light of escalating costs of fire suppression; awareness that not all fires should be suppressed and not all fires can be suppressed, plus improved understanding of the value of a balanced fire program.

**Defining the Future:** Recognition of lessons learned from past and present situations as well as response to policy change causal factors are prerequisite to future policy determinations. Challenges that will be faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be far more complex than ever before experienced. Clear understanding of the present and definition of the future are necessary to characterize program requirements, guide management actions, and shape an effective, mature, and proactive fire management policy. Future policy driving factors are not likely to change from present ones although importance and weighting will increase, but future policy attributes must be more flexible, exhibit a broader range of perspective and direction, and promote a balanced program.

**Summary:** The wildland fire management program will continue to grow. Policy driving factors and considerations will continue to escalate in complexity, numbers, and importance. To meet the need for continual program improvement, a future fire policy must be responsive and provide prudence and wisdom in the management of wildland fire.

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