



# United States Department of the Interior



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## Memorandum

To: Directorate, Field Directorate and Park Superintendents

From: *Adrian* Director *John S. Reppert*

Subject: Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy Program Review

Attached is a copy of the final report of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review. Included at the beginning of the report is a memorandum from Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt and Secretary of Agriculture, Dan Glickman, indicating their acceptance and endorsement of the principles, policies, and recommendations contained in the report.

The review was chartered by the two Secretaries on December 30, 1994, for the purpose of ensuring that Federal fire management policies are uniform and that agencies can effectively work together to carry out fire management programs across agency lines. It was prompted by the recognition that wildland fire management is increasing in complexity and magnitude and that our collective capability to respond is being overextended. In the aftermath of the intense 1994 fire season, all of us in the Federal community strengthened our resolve to work together to ensure that the very best policies and procedures are in place for managing wildland fire.

This year-long review was guided by a Steering Group whose members included top-level managers from the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Biological Service, National Weather Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and U.S. Fire Administration. An interagency core team and five subject-matter teams worked with employees and external constituents, gathering background information and incorporating your excellent input to develop goals and recommendations. Your comments were requested in January 1995 when the review process began and again in June 1995 when a draft report was published.

Safety of firefighters and the public is reaffirmed throughout the report as the first priority in wildland fire management. Another recurring theme is the emphasis on partnerships and coordination among Federal, tribal, State, and local Governments

and public and private entities in virtually all aspects of fire management. The report also recognizes that fire is a resource management tool and that decisions about the use of fire must be addressed by land managers and incorporated into land and resource management plans.

The Secretaries have directed the Department of the Interior agencies and U.S. Forest Service to give high priority to jointly implementing the principles, policies, and recommendations contained in the final report. Consultation and coordination with other Federal, tribal, State, and local partners, as well as a broad spectrum of public and private constituencies, will be inherent in the implementation process. Emphasis will be placed on educating and involving employees and the public, and we will be counting on you to play a lead role in this process.

I have asked Rick Gale, Deputy Chief, Division of Ranger Activities, to take the lead in working with the other Department of the Interior agencies and the U.S. Forest Service to put together a strategy to implement the recommendations of this report. The strategy should be developed by early March 1996.

Additional copies of the report are available from the Office of External Affairs, National Interagency Fire Center, 3833 S. Development Avenue, Boise, Idaho 83705-5354, or by calling 208-387-5150 or 5457. The full text of the report is also available on Internet at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/land/wdfire.htm>.

Attachment

# FEDERAL WILDLAND FIRE POLICY & PROGRAM REVIEW

## Questions and Answers

1. *Q: What prompted the review?*

A: Several factors, including:

- The severity of the 1994 fire season that resulted in increased awareness and concern about the dangers of wildfire and the natural role of wildland fire among natural resource agencies and the public.
- Outcome of an October 4, 1994, House Agriculture and Natural Resources hearing that established a national commitment by USDA and USDI to address wildland fire issues.
- Recommendations from the October 17, 1994, Report of the Interagency Management Review Team in the wake of the South Canyon Fire Investigation that issues of preparedness, fuels management, and wildland/urban fire protection be examined.
- An August 1994 request by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and Cabinet Affairs for a nationwide review of wildland fire issues.
- Internal concerns stemming from the increasing magnitude and severity of wildland fires and issues revolving around the use of wildland fire to restore forest and rangeland health.

2. *Q: What agencies were involved in the review effort and in formulating the new joint policy?*

A: The review was jointly conducted by the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (USDI). Principal agencies from these two Departments included the Forest Service from USDA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Biological Service, and National Park Service from the USDI. Full partners in this interdepartmental and interagency review included the Environmental Protection Agency, National Weather Service, Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), and FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration.

3. *Q: Who led the review?*

A: A senior level Steering Group representing the agencies directed the review. They received staff support from subject-matter experts from the various agencies and bureaus.

**4. Q: *What issues are included in the review?***

A: The review focused on five major policy or program areas, including:

- 1) The role of wildland fire in natural resource management including appropriate strategies for using fire to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems and other societal benefits.
- 2) The deliberate use of wildland fire to meet a number of resource management objectives, from the reduction of fuel hazards (accumulations of flammable dead or living vegetation) to achieving specific responses from fire-dependent plant species, such as the regeneration of aspen.
- 3) Wildland fire protection preparedness and suppression issues such as safe firefighting practices, preparedness planning methods, protection priorities and capability.
- 4) The appropriate role of Federal, state, local, and private organizations in fire protection and management in the wildland/urban interface zone (the area where houses, cabins and other structures mix with the undeveloped wildland).
- 5) Broad coordinated program management issues such as accountability, efficiency, organizational alternatives, weather support, and data management.

**5. Q: *When was the review initiated?***

A: The Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior signed a joint charter establishing the review effort and designating the senior-level Steering Group on December 30, 1994. Work on the project was initiated early in 1995.

**6. Q: *What opportunity has there been for public input during the project?***

A: On January 3, 1995, the Steering Group asked for input from the public and employees to help identify issues that should be addressed by the review. This opportunity was announced externally by Federal Register Notice, press release, and letters to individuals and organizations who had expressed past interest in wildland fire issues. Internally employees were apprised of the process via memoranda, electronic bulletin board, and meetings.

Following the identification of issues, four core teams of subject-matter experts representing Federal, State, and local governments, as well as interest groups and private industry, prepared a draft report.

On June 22, 1995, a Draft Report was published in its entirety in the Federal Register. The report also received wide distribution through an external mailing list and to all agency field offices. The Steering Group asked the public and employees for comment on the draft recommendations contained in the report. In order to get the broadest possible input, the comment period, which initially ended on July 24, 1995, was reopened for an additional 45 days, closing on September 25, 1995.

7. **Q: *How was the Final report formulated?***

A: The goals, and actions contained in the Final report represent the interagency Steering Group's recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior on ways to improve performance, efficiencies, and cooperation in the wildland fire program.

The more than 300 employee and public comments on the draft report were reviewed and used in the preparation of the final report in mid-December 1995

After reviewing the report, the Secretaries issued a joint memorandum to agency heads accepting and endorsing the principles, policies, and recommendations contained in it.

8. **Q: *What are some of the key components of the new Federal Wildland Fire Policy?***

A: The report provides one uniform overall policy under which Federal land management agencies will conduct wildland fire management operations. This will give agencies a stronger foundation upon which to communicate and collaborate with each other and to mutually explore new ways in which cooperation and program effectiveness may be improved. Some of the key components of the new policy include:

- \* Reaffirming firefighter and public safety -- human life -- as the #1 priority.
- \* Recognizing that wildland fire is neither "bad" nor "good" and that it must be allowed to play its appropriate natural role in the ecosystem.
- \* Requiring approved Fire Management Plans for every administrative unit with burnable vegetation, with such plans to address the full range of fire management actions.
- \* Requiring any action on a wildland fire to be based upon the direction in the Fire Management Plan.
- \* Expanding the emphasis of preparedness planning from fire suppression and protection to supporting land and resource management plans.
- \* Changing the rigid protection criteria from 1) life, 2) property, and 3) resource values to 1) life and 2) property and natural/cultural resources, providing administrators the flexibility to weigh the relative values to be protected.
- \* Clarifying that an adequate number of trained, certified employees will participate in the wildland fire program, that others will provide support, and that administrators will be held responsible/ accountable for results.
- \* Clarifying that the Federal role in the wildland/urban interface is wildland firefighting, fuels reduction, education, and technical assistance and that structural protection is the responsibility of Tribal, State, and local governments.

- \* Achieving consistency and compatibility in our approach to fire management across agency boundaries for the health of the land and the benefit of those who use the land.

These are just a few of the policy decisions. Each section of the report contains a set of goals and actions that are necessary to accomplish the guiding principles and policies laid out on pages 4 and 5 of the report.

**9. Q: *What's the next step?***

A: In their memorandum the Secretaries directed that agency heads prepare, by March 1, 1996, a joint integrated strategy for implementing the report. This strategy is to include priorities, time frames, participation, and responsibilities necessary to ensure implementation. Each agency is to designate a senior official with responsibility for coordination and overall implementation.

**10. Q: *How long will implementation take?***

A: The time required for implementation will vary. Some items that help to clarify or enforce current policy or program operations may be dealt with very quickly. Others that are a significant departure from current operations may require extensive collaboration across agency lines and with our non-Federal partners and will take longer to implement. A specific estimate of the implementation period will be available when the interagency implementation strategy is completed this spring.

**11. Q: *What actions may be taken in response to the policy report this field season?***

A: Prior to this field season, many policy and program recommendations may be initiated in response to the report. For example, agency administrators will ensure that all training, preparedness planning, and fire management planning reflects a commitment to firefighter and public safety as the first priority. To the extent possible, preparedness planning and pre-season reviews of existing Fire Management Plans and agreements should include an evaluation of compatibility with the guiding principles and policies reflected in the report. Where appropriate, fire as a critical natural process will be integrated into new land and resource management plans and into efforts to revise and maintain existing plans. In addition, the nine Guiding Principles that are the foundation of the Federal wildland fire management program will influence all future wildland fire decisions.

**12. Q: *What impact will lower funding levels have on implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Policy?***

A: All agencies are committed to implementing the policies, goals, and actions within our budget allocations. Through the implementation plan we will establish priorities that will help us focus our available budget resources. The availability of adequate levels of

funding will, of course, affect the speed with which we achieve full implementation of all policy directives and program goals.

**13. Q: *How will the new policy affect existing agreements?***

A: Existing agreements will continue to remain in effect. As agreements expire or are renegotiated, they will be revised to be consistent with the nine Guiding Principles and the thirteen policy statements that are the foundation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review report.

**14. Q: *What was the Western Governors' Association (WGA) role in development of the new fire policy?***

A: Early in the process, public comment indicated the need for State and local as well as industry involvement in finding and implementing solutions to the escalating problem of fire protection in the wildland/urban interface. In response, the WGA initiated a separate process that is compatible with the Fire Policy Review to build nationwide consensus about the seriousness of this problem and facilitate local partnerships to find and implement creative solutions. The WGA has been successful in bringing State Foresters and Fire Marshals, county officials, representatives from the Insurance Institute For Property Loss Reduction and other underwriters, the building trades industry, academia, members of the Federal government, and other interested groups together for the first time to seek national consensus on fire protection in the interface.

Policies, goals, and actions in the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review report endorse innovative partnerships such as this. The final WGA report should be available early in the spring of 1996. Federal agencies will utilize findings and conclusions from the WGA report in moving forward with fire protection responsibilities in the wildland/urban interface.

**15. Q: *How does the policy report affect the Federal role in protecting structures in the wildland/urban interface?***

A: The policy report is very specific on this issue. Structural fire protection is the responsibility of Tribal, State, and local governments. The Federal operational role in these areas is wildland firefighting; hazard fuels reduction; and cooperative prevention, education, and technical assistance.

Federal agencies may assist with the exterior protection of structures if the respective responsibilities of all parties are defined by written agreement.

**16. Q: *Are Indian trust lands affected by this new policy?***

A: Indian trust lands are recognized as private lands held in trust by the Federal government; Tribal governments possess a "nationhood" status and retain inherent powers of self government. Tribal governments were involved in each step of the public involvement process leading up to the final policy. The final policy report has

been sent to each Tribal government for their information. They may choose to adopt the fire management policy and goals contained in the report to meet their individual needs. The policy report recognizes "Tribes" as important partners in the overall wildland fire management equation and continued involvement of Federal agencies with Tribal governments may be expected.

**17. Q: *Are Department of Defense (DOD) lands affected by the policy?***

A: The DOD manages a significant amount of wildland. They have been apprised of the policy review effort throughout the process, and appropriate DOD staff have been briefed on specific aspects of the policy. They may choose to adopt those policies deemed appropriate for the lands they administer.

**18. Q: *What effect will the new policy have on land, resource, and fire planning processes?***

A: The policy calls for wildland fire, as a critical natural process, to be integrated into land and resource management plans. For environmental and economic efficiencies, this is to occur on a broad or landscape scale, across agency boundaries. Recommendations to integrate wildland fire into the planning process must be based upon the best available science. Planning decisions regarding wildland fire will consider the need to protect, maintain, and enhance natural resources. New land or resource management plans and plan amendments will be consistent with this policy.

More area- or site-specific Fire Management Plans (FMPs) must be consistent with the overall wildland fire management direction contained in land and resource management plans. FMPs must also address firefighter safety, public safety, and public health. As these plans are revised or written they must be brought into conformance with the new policy.

The rate at which all plans are brought into conformance will depend upon agency funding levels.

**19. Q: *What is the basis for making the decision to use wildland fire to achieve resource management objectives?***

A: Decisions to use wildland fire to protect, maintain, and enhance resources must be based on an approved land or resource management plan that sets the objectives for or desired condition of the land.

In those geographic areas where land or resource management plans identify a positive role for wildland fire, managers may choose from several options. This may include monitoring or taking less aggressive action to suppress a wildland fire or the management ignition of prescribed fire to meet predetermined management goals .

In those areas where fire would not meet land or resource plan objectives or would be detrimental to the health of the land or the risks outweigh the benefits, managers would take aggressive initial attack action aimed at cost-effective suppression.

**20. Q: *Is this new policy just a license for Federal arson?***

A: No. Federal land managing agencies have never tolerated arson. The new policy strengthens this commitment. The report contains specific policy requiring federal agencies to work together with state and local governments, groups and individuals to prevent the unauthorized ignition of wildland fires. Lightning-caused or management-ignited prescribed fires must be consistent with land and resource management plans; Fire Management Plans; and human safety, public health, and other appropriate issues.

**21. Q: *How much of an increase in wildland fire is anticipated?***

A: An estimate of the acreage on which wildland fire may be used to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems and reduce fuel hazards cannot be made at this time. This estimate would be available after the implementation strategy is complete, when areas that are suitable for wildland fire reintroduction have been identified, and when future budget capability is known.

**22. Q: *How can the public get involved in the decision-making process to use wildland fire to maintain and improve the condition of wildlands?***

A: The public will be invited to participate in the land and resource management planning process where the goals and objectives for the appropriate role of wildland fire are set. This includes plan amendments. Also, the public will be included in any environmental assessment of the potential alternatives to and impacts from specific wildland fire projects.

**23. Q: *How will agency administrators and fire managers be more accountable for the wildland fire management program?***

A: Agencies will increase the experience and qualification requirements of agency administrators and fire management personnel through training, job details, and job performance guidelines to ensure they have the requisite skills for the job. In addition, fire management job qualifications will be based upon program complexity and be staffed by agency administrators and fire management personnel who meet these qualifications.

In response, agencies will ensure accountability to manage a safe and efficient program based on standard job performance requirements. These requirements will include items specifically related to safety, recognize and reward success, and provide disciplinary action for failure.

**24. Q: *How will recommendations in this report affect the safety of firefighters?***

A: The first guiding principle and first policy statement reinforce that firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity. By policy, all Fire Management Plans must reflect this commitment; and, once people have been

committed to an incident or a prescribed fire, these resources become the highest value to be protected.

**25. Q: *What is fire's natural role in ecosystems and why do we need to be concerned about this?***

A: Over 100 years of excluding fire, combined with past land-use practices, have altered the landscape. This has resulted in changes such as a heavy build-up of dead vegetation, dense stands of trees, a shift to species that have not evolved and adapted to fire, and, in some cases, even an increase in non-native fire-prone plants. Because of these conditions, today's fires tend to be larger, burn hotter, and spread farther and faster, making them more severe, more dangerous, and more costly in human, economic, and ecologic terms.

The goal of the fire policy is to restore the natural balance by adopting land management practices that integrate fire into ecosystems as an essential natural process. Fire can be used to reduce the build-up of dead and downed trees and curb insect and disease infestations, while releasing and recycling nutrients essential for the growth and reproduction of many plant species.

**26. Q: *What other tools do Federal agencies have to reduce fuels hazards?***

A: Many areas are in need of immediate treatment of both live and dead vegetation in order to prevent large, damaging, high-intensity fires. In addition to wildland fire, fuel treatment in these areas may be accomplished by mechanical, chemical, biological, and manual means. In some areas, fuel accumulations may be so heavy that use of wildland fire may not be practical. In these cases pre-treatment of the area by another means may be necessary before wildland fire may be applied. A combination of methods may be necessary to cost-effectively reduce fuel hazards in order to achieve ecosystem health and resource benefits.

**27. Q: *How does this policy mesh with the forest health initiative?***

A: The increased use of wildland fire is one means of improving forest health. When compatible with land and resource management plans, wildland fire can be used to restore ecosystem function and achieve desired resource conditions in forest and rangeland areas.

# Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review

## Key Components

- Reaffirms that firefighter and public safety is #1 priority.
- Requires approved Fire Management Plans for every acre with burnable vegetation.
- Requires that Fire Management Plans address the full range of available fire management actions.
- Defines wildland fire as a critical natural process, not as a wildfire (bad) or a prescribed fire (good).
- Requires that any action on a wildland fire be based upon direction in an approved Fire Management Plan.
- Eliminates the distinction between prescribed fire and prescribed natural fire; the focus is on using wildland fire to maintain/enhance resources and allowing it to function in its natural role.
- Shifts the emphasis of preparedness from fire suppression and protection to having the capability in place to support land and resource management plans. In many situations, such as in highly developed areas, immediate initial attack and prompt suppression will be required.
- Reemphasizes that fire suppression actions must be conducted with a high regard for firefighter and public safety and consistent with resource objectives.
- Clarifies that trained, certified employees will participate in the fire management program, others will support it, and administrators will be responsible/accountable.
- Adjusts protection priorities from three (1 - human life, 2 - property, and 3 - resources) to two (1 - human life and 2 - property and natural/cultural resources), providing the flexibility for making choices between property and natural/cultural resources based on their relative values.
- Shifts the emphasis of interagency cooperation from protection to all aspects of the fire program, e.g., planning, preparedness, suppression, use, monitoring, research, prevention.
- Requires that economic efficiency considerations include commodity, non-commodity, and social values.
- Clarifies that the Federal government is a partner in wildland/urban interface protection, including firefighting, fuels reduction, education, and technical assistance, and that structural fire protection is the responsibility of Tribal, State, and local governments.
- Emphasizes continued cooperation with partners to prevent unauthorized ignition of wildland fire.

# Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review

## Key Messages

The Federal Wildland Fire Management policy and Program Review:

- outlines the very first set of “umbrella” Federal fire management policies; it provides federal agencies with broad parameters, yet does not prohibit them from implementing agency-specific fire management programs and activities.
- emphasizes that public and firefighter safety continues to be the top priority; once firefighting personnel are committed to an incident, their safety becomes the number-one priority.
- seeks to balance protection priorities for property and natural resources at risk.
- will help agencies manage wildland fire efficiently, effectively, and compatibly across agency jurisdictions.
- encourages research programs that provide a sound scientific basis for the integration of wildland fire into land-use and resource management.
- creates a strategy for enhancing coordination and cooperation among land managers and regulators to allow for the use of fire to achieve goals of ecosystem health while at the same time protecting individual components of the environment, human health, and safety.
- provides for consistency/compatibility of fire management practices in areas with similar management objectives regardless of jurisdiction.
- enables managers to take advantage of wildland fire occurrences to achieve resource management objectives and to allow wildland fire to function, as nearly as possible, in its natural ecological role. The policy provides agencies with expanded opportunities to integrate fire into the management of fire-dependent ecosystems.
- recommends that agencies jointly develop criteria for evaluating ecosystem condition by ecosystem type and then identify and prioritize areas for the reintroduction of fire to meet resource objectives.
- directs agencies to research and improve upon the predictive understanding of wildland fire and its relationship to ecosystem dynamics and to strengthen their technological and organizational capabilities to sustain the role of fire in natural ecosystems.
- directs the establishment of an interdisciplinary team that includes all agencies, regulators, and other partners to design a consistent fire “role and use” message for internal and external use.
- recommends that agencies jointly develop programs to plan, fund, and implement an expanded program of prescribed fire in fire-dependent ecosystems.
- requires appropriate treatment of fuel hazards created by resource-management and land-use activities.
- directs agencies to seek authority to eliminate administrative barriers to the transfer and use of funds for prescribed fire on non-Federal lands and across agency boundaries and to allow the carryover of prescribed fire funds from year to year.

- encourages an organizational climate that supports employees who implement a properly planned and conducted prescribed fire program, even when projects have unfavorable outcomes.
- commits the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to seek legislation providing for prompt reimbursement to private landowners for damages resulting from escaped prescribed fires originating on Federal lands.
- directs Federal agencies to establish fire management qualifications based on program complexity and to staff agency administrator, fire program manager, and other fire management positions with individuals who meet these qualifications and are committed to accomplishing the total fire management program. Further directs that job performance standards be developed for agency administrators and fire managers that clearly reflect the complexity and scope of fire management responsibilities and include items specifically related to safety. Agency administrators and fire program managers will be held accountable for conducting the fire program in accordance with established policies, procedures, standards, and direction. These requirements will include recognition for success and disciplinary action for failure.
- recommends that Federal agencies establish partnerships with contractors, cooperators such as rural and volunteer fire departments, and others, which encourage and assist them to adopt and implement Federal standards for training, qualifications, firefighting equipment, personal protective equipment, etc.
- asks Federal agencies to develop consistent appropriations language that enables managers to choose from the full spectrum of fire management actions on wildland fires.
- recommends the development of a standard interagency planning, budgeting, and staffing process.
- recommends that a fire protection assessment process that considers relative values to be protected, Federal agencies will identify and fund, on a cost-share basis, high-priority fuels management activities on Federal lands adjacent to wildland/urban interface areas; these activities may involve adjacent non-Federal lands.
- asks Federal agencies to ensure that all wildland/urban interface areas are covered by Fire Protection Agreements, to renegotiate existing agreements as needed to reflect a Federal responsibility that is compatible with Federal policy, and to ensure that State and local responsibilities are apportioned appropriately; agreements will address all partners in these areas.
- clarifies that structural fire protection is the responsibility of Tribes, States, and local governments (some Federal agencies have full structural protection authority for facilities on lands they administer); recommends that Federal agencies identify their role in the wildland/urban interface through partnerships among Federal, Tribal, State, local, and private entities.
- states that Federal agencies will utilize the Western Governors' Association (WGA) as a catalyst for involving State agencies, as well as local and private stakeholders, in the wildland/urban interface, with the objective of developing an implementation plan to achieve a uniform, integrated approach to hazard and risk assessment and fire prevention and protection.
- directs Federal agencies to complete a national wildland/urban interface fire hazard mapping and scoping study in partnership with Tribes, States, local governments, and the private sector.
- directs agencies to develop the most efficient and effective fire management organization based on land resource management objectives; process should include an analysis of the use of interagency partners.
- directs Federal agencies to standardize fire statistics and develop a common database that is easily accessible.