

Federal Fire Policy and Management Position Paper: Appropriate Management Response

✓ Overview

The Wilderness Society and its more than 310,000 members are dedicated to restoring and protecting America's unparalleled wildland heritage through public education, scientific analysis, and advocacy. To that end, our Wildland Fire Program works to change our nation's approach to fire management to focus on protecting communities, restoring ecosystems, and sustaining fire's role in fire-dependent landscapes, where safe to do so. Our vision is of a landscape composed of fire-safe communities existing within a larger, healthy forest ecosystem.

This paper is one in a series that addresses critical components of federal fire management. It is distilled from materials developed by The Wilderness Society's Wildland Fire Program and substantiated by scientific reports, budget analyses, landscape studies, policy papers and other materials.ⁱ This paper focuses on Appropriate Management Response (AMR), an approach to firefighting that treats each fire individually, accounting for threats to lives and property first, but also weighing factors like ecology and landscape and then applying the appropriate response – which can include the full range of tactical responses from monitoring to aggressive attack.

✓ The Wilderness Society's Role

We work collaboratively with partner groups, land managers, and place-based communities to support fire management strategies that have social and ecological benefits. By building partnerships based on the link between social and economic well-being of communities and long-term forest health, The Wilderness Society hopes to bring about enduring change in fire and forest management. Our coalition work brings groups from across the spectrum of interested stakeholders together, including those that do not traditionally work with one another. We partner with other conservation groups, professional foresters, federal agencies, rural communities, county commissioners, hunters and anglers, and others.

We are engaged in numerous efforts specific to Appropriate Management Response, including educating members of Congress about this new approach, supporting the federal land management agenciesⁱⁱ through Op-Eds and Letters to the Editorⁱⁱⁱ and participating in the interagency "AMR Task Force", an effort to help clarify the implementation of this new strategy.

✓ The Issue

The escalating costs of putting out every fire^{iv} continue to strain agency resources – fighting fires costs billions of dollars each year.^v In fact, the Forest Service's wildland fire costs increased from 13% of their budget in fiscal year 1991 to a staggering 45% projected in fiscal year 2008.^{vi} Other significant changes are also impacting fire management - increasing population in the wildland-urban interface and the warmer temperatures brought on by a changing climate.^{vii} This all contributes to concerns that the agencies will be unable to carry out their other work because of rising firefighting costs. To help address this challenge, the agencies are proposing a change in the way fires are managed - from a "one-size-fits-all" approach where they throw everything at every fire - to a more modern approach where fires are assessed on an individual basis to determine the most "appropriate management response". This appropriate management response – ranging from monitoring to aggressive suppression (and everything in between) – means fire managers' response to a fire will be based on risks to homes and communities, resource availability, landscape characteristics, and other considerations.^{viii} Under this new "appropriate management response" most fires will still be put out quickly, but some fires will be managed differently.

✓ The Wilderness Society's Position

The agencies are moving in the right direction by acknowledging that their approach to fire management needs to change. It's particularly important that they have recognized that each fire must be evaluated

individually, instead of a “one-size-fits-all-approach” of putting every fire out. This will both save money and benefit ecosystems, while still ensuring that people and property are safe. A switch to AMR does not mean that agencies will compromise safety. What it does mean is that they will be more thoughtful about when and where they fight fires and how they use resources. Wildland fires will continue to be designated as either wildfires (requiring suppression action) or Wildland Fire Use events (to achieve ecosystem benefits), but AMR encourages the use of all the tools in the managers’ toolbox. On a WFU event, an AMR strategy would suggest that active suppression occur if portions of the fire imperil community or ecosystem values; conversely, on the portion of a designated wildfire that occurs away from people and property, less aggressive suppression action may be taken - reducing costs and enhancing firefighter safety.^{ix}

The term “AMR” was introduced in the 1995 Federal Fire Policy^x; its use was reaffirmed in the 2001 Update^{xi} and clarified in the 2003 Implementation Plan.^{xii} Some units have employed this strategy, usually without calling it “AMR”, but full-scale implementation is lacking. While agency leaders are encouraging their staff to fully embrace this strategy, confusion still exists over management objectives, terminology, strategies, and tactics. An ongoing commitment and strong leadership will be required to make the transition to AMR a success.

✓ The Wilderness Society’s Recommendations

- **Continue the interagency AMR Task Force.** It’s essential that the agencies have clear direction and terminology to ensure AMR is implemented consistently. This Task Force can help achieve that goal.
- **Finalize AMR Guidebook.** A draft AMR Guidebook was developed but never finalized. The agencies need consistent guidance in an easily accessible document to make the transition to AMR successful.
- **Reward incident commanders** that utilize AMR, i.e. when they consider and utilize all management strategies and options.
- **Public education.** The agencies need to communicate that fires are now going to be handled differently and that AMR gives them needed flexibility in treating each fire individually. The agencies held public education forums this year about AMR; those should continue and be held on every Unit.
- **Update firefighter training courses.** Firefighter training courses need to be modified to include detailed discussion of AMR earlier in and throughout the curriculum.

ⁱ These can be found on our website, see below.

ⁱⁱ Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service.

ⁱⁱⁱ See “LTE: New fire strategy better for forests, people”, in the Billings Gazette (July 22, 2007) by Bob Ekey, TWS Reg. Dir., Bozeman, MT. and OpEd “New forest fire policy brings benefits, budget savings” in the Bozeman Chronicle (July 14, 2007), also by Bob Ekey.

^{iv} The Forest Service suppresses almost all fires during initial attack. For example, in fiscal year 2006 they suppressed 98% of wildland fires (less than 300 acres) during initial attack. U.S. Forest Service, FY2008 Budget Justification, p. 11-3.

^v See U.S. Forest Service, FY2008 Budget Justification, p. 3 and BLM FY 2008 Wildfire Budget Justification p. 13.

^{vi} U.S. Forest Service, FY2008 Budget Justification, p. 3.

^{vii} Forest Service and Interior “Quadrennial Fire and Fuel Report” (2005) contains WUI growth statistics and Westerling et. al, “Warming & Earlier Spring Increase Western U.S. Forest Wildfire Activity” (2006), in *Science*, for climate change impacts on fire seasons.

^{viii} Forest Service, FY Budget Justification, p. 4 (“risk-based suppression” - essentially analogous with “appropriate management response”).

^{ix} Joint Statement of Mark Rey, Under Sec. for Nat. Res. and Env., USDA, & Nina Rose Hatfield, Dep. Ast. Sec., Department of the Interior, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources hearing “Wildland Fire Suppression Cost Containment” (January 30, 2007).

^x Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior, Federal Wildland Fire Management: Policy and Program Review (1995).

^{xi} Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior, Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (2001), http://www.nifc.gov/fire_policy/history/index.htm.

^{xii} Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior, Interagency Strategy for the Implementation Of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (June 2003), http://www.nifc.gov/fire_policy/pdf/strategy.pdf.