

Office of the Secretary

Office of Intergovernmental and External Affairs

U.S. Department of the Interior

1849 C Street, NW, Room 6214

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Fact Sheet: Reducing the Threat of Catastrophic Wildfires and Improving Forest Health

Today's Action (December 12, 2002)

The Bush Administration today announced a series of new administrative steps to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires and improve the health of our nation's forests. President Bush today met with Interior Secretary Norton, Agriculture Secretary Veneman and Council on Environmental Quality Chairman Connaughton and directed them to take several important steps to implement the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

These actions will reduce unnecessary red tape and needless delays that have too often delayed efforts to reduce the threat of devastating wildfires and insect infestations that damage both public and private lands. The new procedures will ensure that needed environmental reviews and public review processes are conducted in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Background on Today's Action

In order to allow vital forest health projects to move forward before the 2003 fire season, the Bush Administration is taking steps now to preserve forest health and reduce the threat of devastating fires. Specifically, the Administration will propose to:

1. Facilitate Timely Reviews of Forest Health Restoration and Rehabilitation Projects. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior are proposing a new procedure that will enable priority forest thinning (fuels treatment) and forest restoration (reseeding and planting) projects to proceed quickly. Fuels treatment projects must be identified by federal agencies working in collaboration with state, local and tribal governments and interested persons and will not be conducted in wilderness areas or include timber sales that are not primarily designed to reduce hazardous fuels buildup. The fuels treatment projects and forest restoration projects will not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads or other infrastructure. The procedures will not be used for activities that would have an adverse effect on threatened and endangered species or their critical habitats, inventoried roadless areas, wetlands, and archeological or historical sites. The projects

will restore forest and rangeland ecosystems, preventing catastrophic wildfires and benefiting many species and their habitat.

2. Amend Rules for Project Appeals to Hasten Process of Reviewing Vital Forest Health Projects. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior will propose steps to promote early and more meaningful public participation and more timely decision-making on forest health project appeals.

3. Improve Endangered Species Act Process to Expedite Decisions. The Departments of Interior and Commerce will improve the process for reviewing fuels treatment projects under the Endangered Species Act. This will facilitate the timely completion of fuels treatment projects while providing needed protection for wildlife and restoring habitat.

4. Establish Improved Process for Environmental Assessments. CEQ will provide guidance for the Departments of Interior and Agriculture to develop an improved and more focused process for reviewing forest health projects. The agencies will review at least 10 initial projects to demonstrate the effectiveness of these new procedures.

The 2002 fire season was one of the worst in modern history. More than 7.1 million acres have burned this year -- more than twice the annual 10-year average. These fires caused the death of 21 firefighters, drove tens of thousands of people from their homes, and destroyed more than 2,000 buildings. These fires also destroyed hundreds of millions of trees, devastated habitat, and severely damaged forest soils and watersheds for decades to come.

America's public lands have undergone radical changes during the last century due to the suppression of fires and a lack of active forest and rangeland management. Our forests and rangelands have become unnaturally dense, and these unhealthy forests are vulnerable to unnaturally severe wildfires. Currently, 190 million acres of public land and surrounding communities are at increased risk of extreme fires.

In May, the federal government reached agreement with 17 Western and Southern governors, tribal leaders, and local officials on a comprehensive 10-year strategy and implementation plan to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires and promote healthy forests. This strategy calls for active forest management and timely decision making through thinning and prescribed burns, to reduce the unnatural buildup of fuels.

Current firefighting efforts are often successful, but land managers must do more to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires. Despite record levels of federal support for firefighting, efforts to tackle the root cause of these fires through active forest management are too often hindered by unnecessary procedural delays and litigation.

Forest Service officials estimate that planning and assessment consume 40 percent of their time at the national forest level, costing more than \$250 million per year.

Although much of this work is important, officials estimate that improving administrative procedures will allow agencies to redirect millions of dollars a year from unnecessary planning to actual forest health restoration work that will improve ecosystems and protect local communities from catastrophic wildfires.

Federal land management procedures are so complex that they prevent timely action to address ecological crises on public lands. For example, a severe winter storm in 1995 knocked down trees on nearly 35,000 acres of forest land in the Six Rivers National Forest in California, leaving the forest at risk of catastrophic wildfires.

Land managers spent three years wrestling with the analytical and procedural requirements needed to remove dead and dying trees and restore the area. Only 1,600 acres were treated due to the complexity of the paperwork requirements. In September 1999, catastrophic wildfires burned through the 35,000 storm-damaged acres as well as 90,000 acres of adjacent forest. It cost \$70 million to contain these fires.

After the fire, the Forest Service was required to start its analysis again, since post-fire land conditions had changed. Seven years after the storm, the project remains tied up in procedural appeals, and the hazardous ecological conditions remain unaddressed.

Today's action is an important step forward. The Administration will continue to work with Congress, state, local and tribal officials and the public on additional common-sense efforts to protect people and restore forest health.

For more information on the President's initiatives, please visit www.whitehouse.gov

This message brought to you by the

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wildfire@iawfonline.org

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Official publications Wildfire Magazine (www.wildfiremag.com) and the

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