



by Tom Harbour
Director, Fire and Aviation Management
Forest Service, Washington, DC

MANAGING WILDFIRE FOR RESOURCE BENEFITS

Change has come to wildland fire use (and its precursor, prescribed natural fire). The Federal Interagency Wildland Fire Community now has only two kinds of fire: wildfire (unplanned fire) and prescribed fire (planned fire). According to the 2009 “Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy,” the Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior agencies can now manage wildland fires for multiple objectives concurrently, and the objectives can change as the fire moves across the landscape. This means that where fire is a major component of the ecosystem, naturally ignited fires can be managed to achieve resource benefits where the impacts to landscape are tolerable. What does that mean to us? Currently, in simple terms, wildland fire management is comprised of two types of fire. First, there are those fires we plan and ignite; we refer to them as prescribed fires. Then, there are unplanned fires, the ones we call wildfires, which can be started either naturally (by lightning strikes) or unnaturally (by humans). Although wildfires are, by definition, unplanned, we conduct a planning and analysis process, closely linked to land management plans, in which we decide ahead of time if we want to allow some naturally occurring fires to burn in order to either reap a positive resource benefit or to allow fire to burn within tolerable limits set by the agency administrator.

Naturally caused wildfires can enhance many natural resource values when we allow fire to play its natural role while we protect private property and social values. For centuries, these lightning-caused fires have resulted not only in the enhancement of land conditions, but in better places for wildlife to live and roam. Simply stated, in some cases, fire on the landscape is beneficial, and resource managers need to become more active in allowing it to be part of the natural landscape.

All fires have risks, but we have developed sophisticated tools that will assist us in predicting what a fire will do.

That’s not to say that managing wildfires for resource benefits comes without risks. All fires have risks, but we have developed sophisticated tools—and are developing more—that will assist us in predicting what a fire will do—where it will go and how it will act.

Managing wildfires as an ecosystem process is a relatively new fire management strategy for most of us throughout the Forest Service. However, there are some forests with long-standing histories of this practice, referred to in the past as wildland fire use, or prescribed natural fire. On national forests such as the Gila in the Southwest Region and the Bitterroot in the Northern

Region, wildfires have been managed for resource benefits since 1972. Managers and the public are beginning to see the advantages of allowing fire to play a natural role in some defined areas, the same role it played more than 100 years ago.

Climate change continues to challenge the Nation and our national forests. Fire season comes earlier and stays longer each year. Fires burn with more intensity. They are more damaging and dangerous to our firefighters, the public, and people’s properties. When appropriate, management of wildfires for resource benefits is one component of fire management that can help us improve the condition of the land where, ultimately, we will be better able to control those unwanted fires when they happen.

We have individuals who specialize in managing naturally ignited wildfires within the Forest Service, but all of us need to be aware of and support the new interagency strategy, in which fires can be managed for multiple objectives. We will continue to suppress human-caused fires at the lowest cost and with the fewest negative consequences possible. Naturally caused wildfires will not be used to benefit natural resources everywhere—not every location is appropriate. But, under the right conditions, wildfires can be a tremendous asset to effectively move us toward our motto, “*caring for the land and serving people.*” ■