

IMPLEMENTING FEDERAL WILDLAND FIRE POLICY—RESPONDING TO CHANGE



Richard Lasko

Federal wildland fire policy has significantly changed since the 1935 introduction of the “10 a.m. policy,” whereby all wildland fires were to be contained by 10 a.m. on the day following ignition. Although revisions to policy and implementation guidance have often been the result of tragic loss-of-life events or notably destructive fire seasons, other factors have provided an impetus to examine relationships between wildland fire policy and Federal land managers’ mandate to protect life and property while managing ecosystems. The exponential growth of the wildland-urban interface—a result of rapid development in and near wildland areas—coupled with the dramatic increase in wildland fire frequency (fig. 1), intensity, and size (fig. 2), and an increasing need to use fire to meet natural resource objectives provided the latest incentives to take a fresh look at the guidance for implementation of Federal wildland fire policy.

Continuing the quest to provide land managers with relevant Federal wildland fire policy, the interagency fire community field-tested potential modifications to the 2003 “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.” Based on information from the field test and discussions with the fire community, fire management agencies modified the Implementation Strategy and removed the categori-

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A revision to the 2003 Interagency Strategy removes the distinction between wildland fire use and wildfire. This will enhance a fire manager’s ability to implement Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy by allowing consideration of the full range of positive and negative attributes of a fire.

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Implementing Federal Wildland Fire Policy—Changes Since 1988

The Yellowstone National Park fires of 1988 reinvigorated the debate over management of wildland fire and raised public awareness that

fire is a necessary disturbance for the overall health and diversity of many ecosystems. The fires of the 2000 fire season stimulated further debate and fostered acceptance for the idea that fire exclusion had increased fire hazards in vegetation types historically characterized by frequent, low- to mixed-severity fire regimes. The 2000 fire season also nurtured the concept that fire exclusion is not operationally or

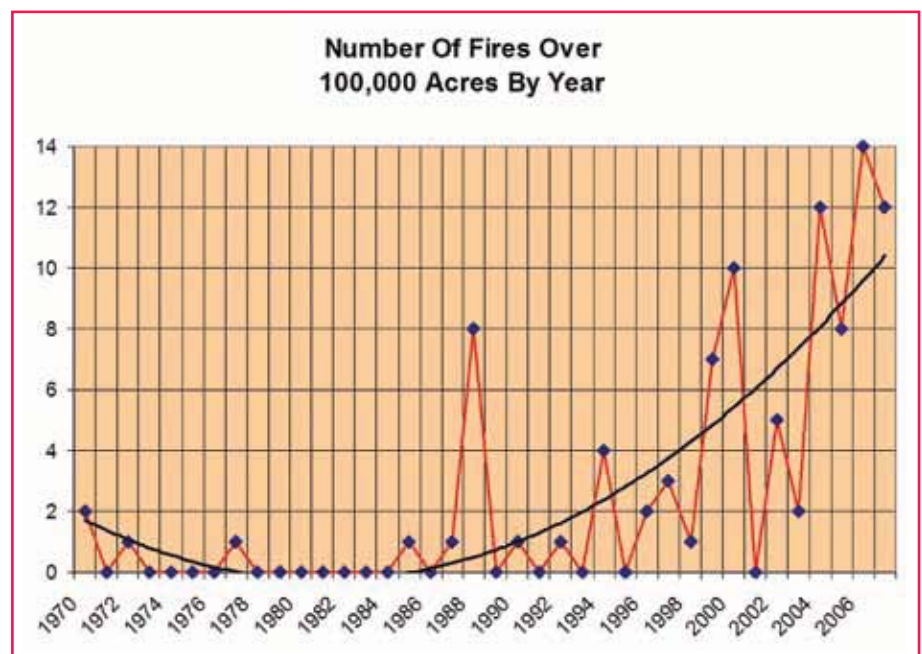


Figure 1—The number of fires greater than 100,000 acres (40,500 ha) in size has increased dramatically over the years.

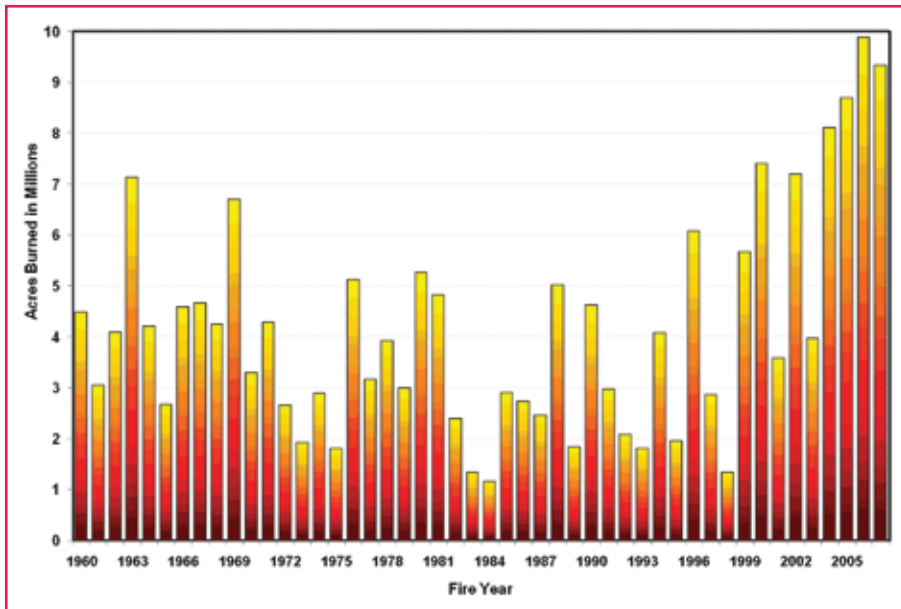


Figure 2—Acres burned, in millions, 1960–2007.

ecologically desirable in infrequent, stand-replacing fire regimes. This discussion led to the development of the “National Fire Plan,” part of a national program linking fire research with land management practices to address the changing forest conditions.

In 1995, the “Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” addressed the role of fire as a natural disturbance and moved fire planning toward integration with resource management. Natural ignitions could be managed to achieve natural resource benefits and maintain fire-dependent ecosystems. The 1995 policy also introduced the appropriate management response concept, which was further refined in the 2001 “Review of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.”

The 2003 “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” broadened the scope of fire management to balance fire suppression with management for ecosystem sustainability. It defined the alternative strategies available to manage unplanned natural ignitions:

manage a fire to achieve resource benefits **or** (author’s emphasis) manage a fire to reduce losses and minimize suppression costs. While all person-caused fires were to be managed as wildfires and treated as such, land and resource management plans or fire management plans could identify the appropriateness of using natural ignitions to achieve resource benefits through wildland fire use. Regardless of the chosen strategy, the 2003 Interagency Strategy required that Federal land managers respond to all wildland fire events with an appropriate management response, which allowed the use of any tactic (or combination of tactics), from monitoring to intensive management actions, to achieve a defined strategic objective.

Impetus for Change

The 2003 “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy,” divides unplanned fire events into two categories: wildland fire use and wildfire. The distinction between the two categories is often obscured, especially when tactical

actions implemented on a wildfire to minimize loss may be essentially the same as those implemented for a wildland fire use event to achieve resource management objectives.

The distinction imposed by the two categories presented difficulties in addressing the biophysical, temporal, and spatial complexities of wildland fire events. The fact is that the effectiveness and efficacy of a fire management strategy in protecting public values and achieving natural resource goals is highly situational. As fire moves across the landscape, scenery, structures, and valued resources are threatened at the same time that land management benefits are realized.

Success of a fire management strategy is dependent upon an intricate web of conditions. Fire managers encounter changing levels of risk as fires occur throughout the season. Actions that may be successful and sensible under one set of conditions may be unachievable or unrealistic under more extreme conditions of weather and terrain or with regard to the national and regional priorities that dictate availability of fire management resources. Costs of a management action may be inordinately high in relation to the resources protected or improved.

Engaging the Future

The 2008 field test of modifications to the 2003 “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy,” and the subsequent dialogue and collaborative engagement with many of our partners and the public provided the opportunity to carefully reconsider the 2003 Implementation Strategy. The 2009 revision to the 2003 “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of

Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” removes the categorical distinction between wildland fire use and wildfire. The revision provides fire managers with the flexibility to respond successfully to changing conditions and address the complexities of the wildland fire environment encountered on a fire event. This will enhance a fire manager’s ability to implement Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy by allowing consideration of the full range of positive and negative attributes of a fire while developing and implementing realistic, cost-effective actions to accommodate changing conditions as a fire moves across the landscape and through time. ■

Web Sites On Fire

Ecosystem Restoration Through Fire

A diverse group of volunteers is promoting the use of controlled fire to restore and maintain ecosystem health on the Mendocino National Forest and surrounding lands. This campaign, called “Restore the Mendo,” has generated support from local governments, landowner associations, and individual citizens as well as State and national environmental groups.

The Web site at <<http://www.restorethemendo.org>> explains the benefits of low-intensity fires to homeowners, landowners, and others. The site provides information about fire management objectives, recent management actions, and positive results and responses. The Web site features video testimonials and a 30-second commercial used for local television spots in an ongoing effort to make prescribed fire an accepted part of maintaining the local landscape and its resources. Links to participating organizations, other fire information sites, and publications are provided.



Watching the Red. Mandi Unick keeps an eye on burnout operations on the Cub Creek Complex, Lassen National Forest, CA. The lightning-caused fire burned more than 19,000 acres in northern California. Photo: Aaron Black-Schmidt, Squad Leader, Columbia River Division Initial Attack Crew, Wenatchee-Okanogan National Forest, June 2008.