

Northern Rockies Appropriate Management Response Communication Plan - 2007

Summary

Appropriate firefighting can range from aggressively suppressing a wildfire threatening values we need to protect, to monitoring a fire in areas where natural processes are encouraged, or where the values at risk do not warrant a costly fire suppression investment.

Resource management plans govern our actions, reflecting land and resource values and management goals. Local fire management plans outline fire management options in any given area and list procedures to accomplish those options.

Fire protection priorities affect management options, including resource availability and the selection of strategies and tactics.

We want to do what makes sense, what is efficient and effective. We base our plans and actions on an understanding of the chance of danger to firefighters and the public, and the values that lie in the path of the fire.

Communication Goals

- Build understanding, acceptance, and support for the AMR concept.
- Provide key messages for land managers to use in discussions about AMR with internal and external audiences.
- Emphasize two-way communication about AMR, especially from September to June.
- Build recognition that this is a Northern Rockies Coordinating Group (NRCCG) strategy, not just the Forest Service

Communication Objectives

- Communicate that AMR includes all available strategies and tactics, encouraging consideration of a wider spectrum of management options from which to make a calculated response based on the circumstances of a particular fire.
- Communicate AMR as an approach to fire that incorporates lessons learned from past and current experience.
- Communicate the importance of AMR to accomplishing the fire management objectives of the Northern Region's Integrated Restoration Strategy.

- Communicate that in using AMR, land managers will apply the appropriate management response to each fire, based on an assessment of conditions and opportunities. Criteria for that decision process will include:
 - land and resource, and fire management objectives
 - complexity of the fire incident
 - the relative risk to firefighter and public safety, and to other values to be protected
 - complexity of the wildland fire, including long-term potential
 - probability of success and consequence of failure of the management decision
- Communicate a consistent message that clarifies the AMR approach and explains differences.

Communications Strategy

Appropriate Management Response represents an important step in the interagency learning approach to wildfire. Our strategy should recognize that it is new, but it is not that new...it is different, but it is not that different. Like other contemporary approaches to resource management, AMR evaluates current and likely conditions then tailors an appropriate response based on the whole, not on separate parts. Looking at the separate parts is what got us where we presently find ourselves.

We will enhance our effectiveness by communicating in terms others understand, with examples that make sense. This will not be that easy, but it will not be that hard. Every parent has done it in communicating to a child the difference between the beneficial effects of a fire in the fireplace and the disastrous effects of a fire in the kitchen.

This will require a continuing effort over the next 5-8 years. We are turning an aircraft carrier of experiences and expectations. We need to be in this for the long haul.

Background

Fires are burning larger and larger areas in the Northern Rockies and costing more and more to suppress. Over the decades, federal fire policy has changed as conditions have changed. We need to focus our efforts on protecting the most important values, and allowing fires to burn where their effects reduce risk and contribute to the long-term health and sustainability of the ecosystems in which they occur.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans developed with individual counties and Wildfire Hazard Assessments, and Mitigation Plans developed for the reservations, are important tools for identifying both values to protect and the agencies and entities that share the responsibility for the appropriate management response in the wildland urban interface.

In determining an AMR strategy, we have the following options, which may be implemented singly, in steps, or concurrently:

- Perimeter control—contain and control the edge of the fire. If applied to the whole fire this work tries to keep the fire as small as possible.
- Point protection—protect high-value sites and areas near the edge of the fire.

- Confine—take advantage of terrain and natural conditions to stop the fire in areas where we have a better chance of ensuring the safety of firefighters
- Monitor—where values or threats are low, keep track of the fire while limiting both costs and danger to firefighters.

A map of fire management units will be produced for the Northern Rockies to help develop the AMR and to allow region-wide monitoring and strategic oversight of AMR decisions. That map will allow local units, agency administrators, and the Northern Rockies Multi-agency Coordination Group to simultaneously and similarly identify and prioritize protection priorities for initial response and provide a framework for the type of extended action that will occur on wildfires that escape initial action. The map will also help reference wildland fire use opportunities and decisions. It will further be used as a communication tool for both internal and external audiences to help change expectations for fire management and accept different outcomes. This is not a decision document. It is a tool to help prioritize work.

Coordination

Close coordination will be required between FAM, PGR, and line officers to provide message consistency and meet emerging product or activity needs.

Implementation

Key Messages and Talking Points

- Wildland fire is part of the Northern Rockies ecosystems. It is an essential part of how forests, grasslands and shrublands remain healthy.
 - The risk of large fires has increased dramatically in the last century. There is more wood and other vegetation to burn and conditions are drier more often.
 - Past fire suppression decisions have interfered with natural processes and, in some cases, added to the intensity and severity of fires.
 - We need fire to resume its role on the landscape in some locations. This requires us to make informed choices based on management direction and conditions.
 - We cannot afford the expense or long-term disruption to natural ecosystems by trying to put out all fires everywhere, nor should we try.
- AMR is not new. It is a thoughtful approach to evaluating the conditions and context of a wildfire and designing a response to effectively addresses them.
 - Encourages consideration of a wider spectrum of management options in response to each fire.
 - First appeared in the 2001 Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.
 - Developed using lessons learned, particularly since 2000.

- AMR has been occurring, to a large degree, in the management of fire on the landscape both through increasing application of wildland fire use and through fire suppression tactics that require less aggressive control actions.
- We manage all fires. Some will burn in an area we define, some we will suppress.
 - We will develop sensible fire management strategies in close consultation with affected interests.
 - We have a wide array of fire management tools available to us to apply to accomplish our objectives.
 - We plan for ways to manage the fire into the future.
- More people are living in and near increasingly fire-prone forests and grasslands, adding to the values threatened by fire.
 - In some cases, we need to keep fire away from important, high-value areas. This requires us to prioritize and use our resources deliberately.
 - Protection decisions in these areas commonly come with increased cost and risk to firefighter and public safety.
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Key Audiences

- R1 Forest Service employees
- Federal land and wildland fire management agencies
- Congressional staffs (local and Washington offices)
- Governors and senior staff
- State land, natural resource, and wildland fire management agency leadership
- State and local law enforcement organizations
- Local government officials
- Land owners adjacent to public land, and with an interest in public land management
- Media
- Resource user groups/associations
- Environmental organizations

Products/Activities

Products	Producer	Draft due	Final due
PowerPoint presentation	FAM	06/07	07/07
News release(s)	P&GR	06/07	07/07
Briefing paper(s)	FAM	06/07	07/07
Q&As	FAM/PGR	06/07	07/07
FSweb	P&GR	06/07	07/07
Internet	P&GR	06/07	07/07

Products	Producer	Draft due	Final due
Fire Management Unit Map	FAM	06/07	07/07
AMR DVD	P&GR	08/07	09/07
Lessons Learned	FAM	11/07	11/07

Activities	RO	Forest/Grassland	District
FS employee presentations	07/07	07/07	07/07
Brief congressional staff	07/07		
Brief local officials		07/07	07/07
Release to media	07/07		
Media follow-up	07/07	07/07	07/07
Employee/safety meetings		07/07	07/07
FSweb	07/07		
Internet	07/07		
Distribute AMR DVD	09/07	07/07	07/07
Evaluate	10/07	10/07	10/07
Meeting to share findings	11/07		
Develop revised products and activities based on findings	11/07		

Contingency Plan

It is likely that the urgency of a fire emergency will stress short-term progress in achieving understanding, acceptance, and support of AMR. In some cases, political or economic pressure may overcome AMR. Should that happen, it will be important to retain a focus on what we attempted to achieve with AMR – what we were thinking – but were unable to sustain because of changing conditions or circumstances.

Evaluation

Effectiveness of this communications program needs evaluation at the end of every fire season. Line officers and fire officials especially will hear lots of feedback from local elected and public safety officials. What worked, what didn't work; what statements resonated, what statements didn't? What were the successes that we can carry forward to gain more understanding, acceptance, and support?

Question and Answers: The following Q & A's are provided for use working with the media and public. Questions regarding Forest Service policy and budget that cannot be answered within the scope of this guidance should be referred to the Regional Office.

Q1. What is AMR?

A1. Appropriate management response is any specific action suitable to meet fire management unit objectives. AMR is selected from a range of tactical options developed by using FMU strategies identified in the forest or grassland fire management plan.

Q2. Is this new Forest Service Fire Policy?

A2. Appropriate management response is not a new concept, but its purpose has been reinforced with current policy. The term, appropriate management response, was developed through the 2001 Review and Update of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy.

Q3. Was past Forest Service policy inappropriate?

A3. The Forest Service has always practiced the appropriate response to wildland fires, based on policy and fire management objectives existing at the time. As landscape and other environmental conditions have changed, so has the concept of the appropriate response. A principal difference now is the recognition that our response to a specific wildland fire should be based on the right thing to do in that situation, not what we are capable of doing.

Q4. Will the AMR process save taxpayer money?

A4. It is likely that fire suppression costs, per incident, will rise at a slower pace against inflation with implementation of appropriate management response. With an emphasis on taking management actions based on what we should do rather than what we can do, the commitment of fire suppression resources should be more effective and cost efficient.

Q5. Is this process used by all wildland fire fighting agencies?

A5. Yes, but the concept and definition of appropriate management response may vary by agency due to the legal mandate that establishes their fire management mission and authority. What constitutes the appropriate management response, or range of responses, for one agency may not be legally available to a different agency.

Q6. How will application of AMR look in comparison to previous fire years?

A6. All wildland fires will be managed for the best possible effectiveness in meeting objectives and efficiency to accomplish strategies and tactics.

Q7. What is wildland fire use?

A7. Wildland fire use recognizes the role of fire in establishing and maintaining natural ecosystems. A naturally ignited fire managed this way will have a long-term plan developed for it, and will see the use of appropriate tactics (monitoring from a distance to limited actions to protect specific areas within a fire). The purpose is to allow fire, under a detailed management prescription and plan, to burn within a defined area for natural resource benefit.

Q8. Will all fires be staffed and who determines the staffing levels?

A8. The appropriate management response requires a response be taken on all fires and to be managed, but not necessarily staffed. On one end of the management spectrum, a fire may be monitored from a distance, with no personnel directly on the ground. On the other end, fire suppression personnel and other resources may be assigned to a fire's entire perimeter. Staffing levels, and the actions taken by personnel and resources assigned to each fire, will be determined by the specific management plan developed for the fire.

Q9. What does “values at risk mean?”

A9. Values at risk are natural, cultural, and physical features and economic activities that managers try to keep from sustaining loss or being damaged by wildland fire. The suppression strategies and tactics used are based on the potential for loss or damage. Where there is a high potential for loss or damage then a high level of response will be initiated. Conversely where there is a low potential for loss or damage than a lower level of response will be initiated.

Q10. Who determines the “values at risk” and by what process?

A10. Interdisciplinary planners on national forests and grasslands identify the values that occur on and adjacent to the lands for which the Forest Service manages or has the wildland fire protection responsibility. Values may include:

- wildlife and fisheries habitat
- commercial and non commercial timber lands
- developed and undeveloped recreational sites and opportunities
- livestock grazing opportunities and use
- clean air and water
- wilderness and research areas
- cultural and historic sites
- homes, businesses, and community infrastructure
- social and economic consideration

Using economic standards, knowledge of local and regional prices for goods and services, and specific values a comparable figure can be used for calculating and comparing those values.

Q11. Will I have input on placing valuation on my home, vegetation and view shed, etc.?

A11. Decision makers and fire managers look at the collective value of all natural, cultural and physical features and economic activities in a fire environment and compare that to the cost of different management choices. The value of homes and businesses is usually determined by obtaining information from local tax roles or equivalent information and averaging that against the known or estimated number of such developments in the fire area.

Q12. What is the range of possible responses?

A12. The Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy provides a broad spectrum of possible responses to unplanned ignitions. Those responses may range from monitoring from a distance to aggressive fire suppression actions. In between may be protection of by location of specifically identified resources, or tactics that will only be used if certain circumstances occur and are described in long term plans to management the fire. The selected response must be supported by approved resource management plan objectives and adhere to guidance provided in unit fire management plans.

Q13. What criteria will be used to select the management response?

A13. The criteria used to determine the appropriate management response includes: firefighter and public health and safety; land and resource and fire management objectives; cause of a fire and location; current and potential fire behavior and fire effects; values to be protected from fire (suppression) or benefited by fire (wildland fire use); and cost effectiveness.

Q14. Does this mean some fires will be allowed to burn?

A14. In all cases, fires will be managed. The level of management may vary. Some fires may only be monitored from a distance to ensure resource benefit and some may be staffed with personnel and other resources due to the potential threats at risk. The level of management on a fire will be determined by the specific management plan developed for the fire.

Some fires may burn until there are changes in weather or vegetation slows or stops the fire spread. Some wildfires will burn larger areas for longer periods of time.

Q15. If fires are allowed to burn, will the public have input on the decision?

A15. All fires are managed within a range of strategies based on objectives found in the resource management plan (developed with public input). Decision makers and fire managers with the responsibility to develop and implement the appropriate management response for a fire will inform the local public of their specific decisions and the reasons for those. Public interests will be listened to, acknowledged, and addressed as decisions and actions are implemented during a particular fire.

Q16. How will smoke health considerations be handled? Will the public have input?

A16. State and local environmental quality agencies establish regulations regarding smoke thresholds, limitations, and mitigation requirements for compliance. Wildland fire is considered an emergency activity. Smoke produced from these fires is understood to present possible health impacts. In fire prone ecosystems not maintained by fire, smoke impacts will be more severe than smoke produced from fires in fire maintained ecosystems.

Q17. Will all fires have pre-determined limits of where and how they burn?

A17. A specific plan is developed for managing all wildland fires, either as a suppression incident or a wildland fire use event. The management plan for the fire includes specific actions to contain or confine the fire within a specific area, including protection actions for any features within or adjacent to the area for which damage or loss by the fire is deemed unacceptable.

Q18. Who will make the determination that a fire no longer meets objectives or is out of control?

A18. Every wildland fire has an incident commander (for a suppression incident) or fire use manager (for a wildland fire use event) assigned to oversee the fire. That person is responsible to the agency holding authority for management of lands involved in the fire area.

The fire situation is reviewed each day and compared to the plan of action for managing the fire. If changed conditions result in the fire no longer meeting the objectives established for it, the plan is revised to implement a new strategy.

Q19. How will people be informed regarding the fire situation and the decisions that are made on individual fires?

Q19. Providing accurate and timely information to the public about a fire situation is considered very important. Agency fire managers establish a system for each fire to provide public information. The system may include scheduled public meetings, direct contact with residents and businesses, and media announcements.

Q20. Is there a formal public objection process to AMR processes?

A20. The public involvement process in revision and amendment of forest and grasslands land and resource management plans provides the formal opportunity for public comment about the appropriate management response.

Key Messages and Talking Points

- Wildland fire is part of the Northern Rockies ecosystems. It is an essential part of how forests, grasslands and shrublands remain healthy. Past fire suppression activities have not always been beneficial, and in some cases have added to the intensity of inevitable fires that will visit the landscape.
- Wildland fire management agencies must balance the needs of fire dependent ecosystems with considerations for the health and welfare of people and protection of property.
- The wildland fire workload is growing due to fuels accumulation, development in previously forest and range open space and warming global climate trends.
- More wildland fires now exceed our capability to suppress them during initial attack operations. Some fires have always escaped initial attack and our capability to “catch” these fires is not always related to resource funding because the escape is influenced by fuel, weather or topographic factors.
- Historically, once fires exceeded our capability, fire officials manage these fires based on the resources available. When shortages occurred, resources were shifted to the highest priority areas which were usually the areas with the greatest potential for loss.
- It is prudent in the decision making process to assign resources to areas that have the greatest potential for loss. It is more cost efficient and effective to position appropriate levels of resources on these incidents and avoid the need to reposition excess resources to priority events.
- To be effective, we need to work with our partners and make decisions in a timely manner. Decisions need to be based on what we should do, not what we can do.

CLOSING STATEMENT

As the range of possibilities for application of an appropriate management response is considered, it is important to remember, no fire will simply be “allowed to burn.” Every fire will be managed at some level, either in a monitoring status or actual staffing with personnel and resources, until the objectives set for it are met and the fire is declared out. The decision to provide opportunities for fire to be managed for natural resource benefits or confined in order to provide for safe and cost effective fire management operations is a “hands on” process. Managers will decide the appropriate response that is commensurate with fire complexity and the potential for loss or damage.