



The Lookout

Newsletter of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees

“Sustaining the Heritage”



SPECIAL EDITION

DECEMBER 12, 2013

Today we bring you a special edition of “The Lookout” releasing our NAFSR position paper on Fire Management.

Why? Executive Director Darrel Kenops says it best: “NAFSR members have extensive experience in wildfire, prescribed fire and sustainable forest and grasslands management policy and practice. Our Fire Management Policy Statement and Recommended Actions come at a very critical time for the U.S. Forest Service, for affected communities and for our Nation. There is a growing understanding the current situation is unsustainable and now it’s time for enacting significant fire policy improvements if we are to save our National Forests and National Grasslands. We join with many who realize this situation is unsustainable and the need for improvement and action.”

Among the issues facing the National Forests and the Forest Service, NAFSR

NAFSR PRESENTS FIRE POSITION PAPER TO THE CHIEF

NAFSR leaders met with Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell on Thursday December 12 to discuss the newly released position paper “FIRE POLICY STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS”.

In an accompanying letter to Tom, NAFSR Chair Jim Golden and Fire Committee leader Al West stated that “we believe that the current fire management situation in many of our National Forests, from the standpoint of natural resources, community welfare, economics and general stewardship is unsustainable.” The letter continued “In addition, it is a significant threat to all Forest Service programs, both fire and non-fire related as well as the statutory responsibilities in all mission areas.”

The paper (see next pages) was developed by the NAFSR Fire Committee over the past year, and formally adopted at the Board meeting in Salt Lake City in October.

“This is an important continuous improvement and learning opportunity, as we seek to lessen wildfire costs, watershed and natural resource damages and community losses” said Darrel Kenops NAFSR Executive Director.

Jim Golden, Board Chair, added that “we know that NAFSR is one of the very few, if not the only, organization that can speak out in support of the overall management of the National Forests and the Forest Service mission. Our intent is that this paper will get a widespread distribution, to help bring this important issue to a broader audience. The fire issue runs far deeper than just suppression cost or smoke impacts. Rural communities are impacted disproportionately, but even urban residents are affected by water quality degradation, loss of popular recreation opportunities, and significant effects to sensitive wildlife habitat. NAFSR intends to elevate this issue at the national level.”

With your help, our NAFSR members, we will continue to work to raise awareness of the threats to our National Forests and Grasslands. We know of no one more concerned and better prepared to do that!

members feel the strongest about fire management. Our opinions run the gamut about suppression, the use of prescribed fire, and wildland fire use for resource benefit. But we believe that our position paper outlines some fundamental approaches that the Forest Service Eparecan take to build confidence in the program among retirees and the general public too.

Jim Golden, Chair

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FOREST SERVICE RETIREES
FIRE POLICY STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

(Adopted by the NAFSR Board of Directors, October 2013)

Public discussion about Wildland Fire Policy and its implementation continues to escalate as individual fire size and intensity increases, suppression costs soar, natural resource losses and property damage become intolerable, and fire fighters are increasingly exposed to dangerous conditions. News releases, magazine articles, professional journals, editorials and hundreds of emails question the validity of current Fire Policy. They further question whether those responsible for carrying out the policy clearly understand how it should be implemented. To add to the confusion, many comments from within the fire community contradict one another pointing out the lack of policy clarity.

Members of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR - www.fsx.org), along with others, have been vocal in regard to the need for clarification and redirection in view of the current contributing factors that include drought, warming climate and millions of acres of unhealthy forests where the fuel loading is out of balance with natural historical conditions. The linkage between poor forest health and fire size and intensity is undeniable. Reasons for the poor health of the majority of National Forests include legal challenges to proposed management projects, other Agency regulations, administration policies, conflicting legislative mandates and funding constraints. Each of these above factors constrains professional and scientific management and protection of the National Forests and Grasslands. We know that the current custodial management situation in many of our National Forests is unsustainable.

The NAFSR Fire Committee, along with other NAFSR members, have been meeting annually with the Forest Service Deputy Chief, State & Private Forestry, and National Director of Fire and Aviation to share viewpoints, discuss local situations and offer suggestions to assist the Forest Service in better communication and implementation of Fire Policy. But the issue is much larger than just Fire Policy. First there needs to be clear understanding and belief in the mission and broad societal value of National Forest and Grassland resources; potential impacts on adjacent non-federal land; the need for cooperation and coordination with tribal, state and local organizations and the management of risks associated with fire. There needs to be much broader recognition by the American public, that their National Forests are highly valued national assets with both intrinsic and economic value that must be managed following sound scientific principles with adequate financing in order to maintain their health and achieve the purposes for which they were established.

Confusion comes when some base their comments on a belief that fires are natural and in many cases do not require suppression action. Since the late 1970's Forest Service policy has permitted line officers to make decisions on when and where immediate direct suppression action may not be necessary. However, in doing so, there must be strict adherence to policy and guidelines. The Fire Policy review following the 1988 Yellowstone Fires and other major reviews clearly outline those conditions and recommend guidelines that should be followed.

Frequent turnover of personnel leads to some being unfamiliar with locations and conditions on their units. Authority for non-suppression decisions should only be given to those with demonstrated knowledge and understanding of expected fire behavior and potential resources and property damage. This knowledge must also include expectation of downstream damage and off-site losses to other resources and non-federal property.

Once suppression decisions have been made, actual safe aggressive and effective action to contain the majority of fires is believed to be exemplary.

IT IS THE POSITION OF NAFSR THAT THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS ARE NEEDED TO CLARIFY AND IMPROVE THE CURRENT FIRE POLICY SITUATION AND NAFSR WILL WORK ACTIVELY WITH OTHER PARTNERS TO IMPLEMENT THEM:

1. There is a need to gain recognition and broad support that the National Forests and National Grasslands must be actively managed to restore them to a healthy and sustainable condition for future generations to benefit from and enjoy.
2. Seek ways to increase funding to improve forest health and reduce fuel loading through management that includes the use of prescribed fire and silvicultural treatments, both at National Forest boundaries and in the interior. Sustainable utilization of biomass and forest products could finance significant forest restoration.
3. Past fire management reviews need to be revisited, including the Yellowstone Evaluation Report following the 1988 fires. They should be updated, revisions made where necessary and reissued as policy for wide understanding.
4. Recent Fire Policy Statements should be clarified to ensure there is understanding of the different types of fires. It is essential that personnel understand and implement rapid aggressive initial attack in all areas and situations where there is no pre-approved and clearly defined plan that calls for another approach.
5. Line Officers and Fire leadership must receive adequate training, and with help, gain experience in implementing National Fire Policy. Assistance of local knowledgeable personnel and others should be a requirement until experience is obtained.
6. "Hot" fire review of the majority of controversial, costly and damaging fires should be carried out. Follow-up reviews should be independently made with recommendations on accountability.
7. There is a need to continue to pursue realistic fire suppression funding that is adequate so that other general appropriations shall not be used or taken to support fire suppression. The intent of the Flame Act of 2009 has not been realized.

8. Develop a policy statement emphasizing all employees can have and are encouraged to have a role during fire emergencies, regardless of duty location and personal limitation.
9. Emphasis on preparing fire management and leadership succession planning should have high priority. As experienced trained fire -qualified personnel retire, it is critical to step up planning and implementation of training, including practical experience, in accordance with a long term plan.
10. There is a need to actively pursue support for reducing existing legislation conflicts and exposure to frivolous appeals and litigation that hamper proposed management projects, and help to streamline environmental planning to make it more effective and less costly.

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees stands ready to provide assistance to accomplish the above action items.

**From November 5, 2013
U.S. Senate Agriculture,
Subcommittee on
Conservation, Forestry and
Natural Resources
Testimony**

The USFS predicts wildfire could affect significantly more acres in the future, from the current 9 million acres burned per year to 12-15 million acres annually in the near future that could grow to 20 million acres per year by 2050.

Forest Service estimates 464 million acres of all vegetated lands, forest, grassland, woodlands, are at a moderate to very high risk of uncharacteristic large wildfires. Currently 58 million acres of National Forest System units have high to very high large fire potential.

Some 1,400 U.S. Forest Service post fire assessment found that pre fire fuel, vegetative treatments were in 90% of cases studied, successful in modifying extreme fire behavior so fire suppression action was effective in taming out of control wildfires.

Jim Hubbard, USFS Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, shared that wildfire impact costs extend well beyond the first year Burned Area Emergency Rehab (BAER) funding. He recognizes the "true cost" of wildfire and that burned area rehab costs covers only a fraction of total wildfire costs to natural resources,

communities and important
infrastructure.

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays From Your NAFSR Board of Directors



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