



Fire Executive Council

Briefing Paper

Date: 03/14/2008

Prepared by: AMR Task Group

Topic: Modifying Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Policy

Goal: Allow for a full spectrum of management response to wildland fire on federal lands commensurate with public and firefighter safety, the current and predicted risk, values to be protected, and land management objectives.

Background: In November 2006, the USDA OIG found that the Forest Service could strengthen the cost-effectiveness of its fire fighting without sacrificing safety by increasing wildland fire use to reduce forest vegetation and underbrush that may fuel future fires. Current interagency guidance adopted in 2003 restricts the ability to use the full spectrum of tactical options commensurate with public and firefighter safety, risk, values to be protected, and land management objectives thus hindering our ability to strengthen cost effectiveness in firefighting.

To address this problem a task group has been assigned by the NWCG to develop recommendations and timeframes for a phased modification of the *Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (2003)*. The Fire Executive Council, after consultation with partners, will agree on policy modifications and an implementation timeframe for discussion and final decision at a March WFLC meeting.

The task group is at a point where decisions from the Fire Executive Council and Wildland Fire Leadership Council are needed on proposed changes to the operational statements in the Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. We request decisions on the following items, and request that Items 1, 2 and 5, being inherently linked in concept and application are considered together for a unified decision. Items 2 and 3 are also linked and should be considered together for a decision as well.

1. Existing guidance - "Only one management objective will be applied to a wildland fire. Wildland fires will either be managed for resource benefits or suppressed. A wildland fire cannot be managed for both objectives concurrently. If two wildland fires converge, they will be managed as a single wildland fire."
 - **Decision Needed:** Modify to permit any wildfire or merged wildland fires to be managed concurrently for both protection and resource benefit objectives established in Land/Resource Management Plans.

Decision: Approved Disapproved

Comments:

2. Existing guidance – "Once a wildland fire has been managed for suppression objectives, it may never be managed for resource benefit objectives."

- **Decision Needed:** Modify to permit any wildfire or merged wildland fires to be managed concurrently for both suppression and resource objectives established by Land/Resource Management Plans. Permit reassessment and modification of objectives as an event moves across the landscape and as fuels and weather conditions change.

Decision: Approved Disapproved

Comments:

- Actions necessary to implement items #1 and #2:

Immediate and short-term (2008)

- Issue interim implementation guidance for federal wildland fire policy and provide direction on the use, and evaluation of documentation, decision support and assessment tools.
- Issue request for candidates to participate in trial areas for 2008. Candidate areas must assure that direction in Land/Resource Management Plan (L/RMP) and Fire Management Plan (FMP) allow for the use of wildland fire on the landscape while maintaining that no unauthorized human ignition can be managed for resource benefit, regardless of the objectives in the L/RMP.
- Forest Service and Department of Interior designation of interagency trial areas
- Develop and facilitate training and orientation for the implementation of interim guidance and associated decision support tools.
- Develop and implement communications strategy explaining Federal Wildland Fire Policy and development of new implementation guidance.
- Monitor and assess application of interim guidance and use of decision support tools during the 2008 fire season.

Long Term: (Initiated in 2008-2009 and extending beyond)

- Assess 2008 prototype application of interim guidance.
- Develop and issue Final Implementation Guidelines for Federal Wildland Fire policy.
- Incorporate Implementation Guidance in handbooks, manuals, and training venues.
- Develop a tactical implementation guide to help field practitioners implement Federal Wildland Fire policy.
- Develop and implement communications strategy explaining Federal Wildland Fire Policy and Implementation Guidance.
- Review and update, where appropriate, the L/RMP and FMP to allow for the use of wildland fire on the landscape.
- Issue guidance for Section 7 and NMFS consultations, air quality, and Emergency Stabilization and Burned Area Rehabilitation as they relate to wildfire managed within the full spectrum of responses where benefit is the overriding consideration.
- Issue guidance for reporting benefits obtained from unplanned ignitions.
- Revise Land and Resource Management plans to define the parameters and objectives for applying unplanned ignitions.

- Estimated time frames:
Prototype deployment and field testing of WFDSS in 2008 with all the implementation elements listed above. Training of line and field personnel initiated in 2008 would be expanded and continued. Provide for full implementation by all field units in April 2009.

5. Existing guidance – “When a prescribed fire or a fire designated for wildland fire use is no longer achieving the intended resource management objectives and contingency or mitigation actions have failed, the fire will be declared a wildfire. Once a wildfire, it cannot be returned to a prescribed fire or wildland fire use status.”

- **Decision Needed:** Modify to separate association of prescribed fire and wildland fire use as their unique ignition sources define management options. Prescribed fire is a planned ignition managed for resources objectives established by Land/Resource Management Plans and stated specifically in the prescribed fire plan or project level NEPA. Once the prescribed fire is no longer meeting those objectives and is declared a wildfire it receives the same reassessment and modification of objectives as any other wildfire event given the location, current conditions (fuels, weather, etc) and identified management considerations. In contrast, wildland fire use is an unplanned ignition that receives a response within the full spectrum of tactical options commensurate with public and firefighter safety, risk, values to be protected, and land management objectives.

Decision: Approved

Disapproved

Comments:

- What it will take to implement this item:
 - After the prescribed fire is declared a wildfire the same implementation tasks/issues identified for items 1 and 2 apply.
 - Reinforce current interagency prescribed fire policy related to declaring an escaped prescribed fire. This may be accomplished through an interagency memorandum.
 - Consistent interagency escaped prescribed fire review policy to assess the decision process(s) in managing the declared wildfire. The goal is to prevent deliberate contrary management of escaped prescribed fires to achieve some type of target accomplishment. May be developed through the National Interagency Fuels Coordinating Group.
- Estimated time frames:
This element can be implemented within the same time frames identified for items 1 and 2.

6. Existing guidance - Current implementation guidance defines three distinct types of wildland fire; **wildfire**, **wildland fire use** and **prescribed fire**. This typing of wildland fire was developed as part of the 2003 Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and created expectation that wildland fire use could be managed similar to prescribed fire which has never been attainable due to ecosystems dynamics, changes in climate and human influences on these unplanned ignitions. Land managers do not control the location or timing of this ignition type so the decision space is limited by the role of wildland fire specified in Land/Resource Management Plans.

- **Decision Needed:** Modify to define two distinct types of wildland fire differentiated by whether the ignition is planned or unplanned. A wildland fire initiating from a planned ignition is known as **prescribed fire**. A wildland fire initiating from an unplanned ignition is known as a **wildfire**. This moves wildland fire back within the frame of the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy where the specifics of the Land/Resource Management Plan define the role of wildland fire, the appropriate management response to fire, and the considerations when determining that response.

Decision: Approved Disapproved

Comments:

- What it will take to implement this item:
 - Issue interim implementation guidance for federal wildland fire policy and provide direction on how to incorporate this modification.
 - Units that do not have direction in Land/Resource Management Plan (L/RMP) and Fire Management Plan (FMP) allowing for fire to achieve resource benefits cannot consider benefits in wildfire analysis. In the same vein, no unauthorized human ignition can be managed for resource benefit, regardless of the objectives in the L/RMP.
 - Develop and facilitate training and orientation for the implementation of interim guidance.
 - Develop and implement communications strategy explaining Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Policy.
 - Phase in use of recommended terminology and phase out term “wildland fire use” as Departmental and Bureau policies, L/RMPs and FMPs are adjusted to reflect this terminology.
- Estimated time frames:
This element can be implemented within the same time frames identified for items 1 and 2, beginning in 2008.

Proposed Implementation Steps and schedule:

Phase 1 – (Time frame: 3 months)

Develop and issue interim guidance to meet short term implementation strategies outlined above and the use of WFDSS in specific trial areas.

Phase 2 (Time frame: 5 months after Phase 1 completion)

Finalize guidance and issue a revised “Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy” by January 1 2009. Develop and implement training and communication strategy. Begin examination of feasibility of allowing unauthorized human ignitions to achieve resource objectives.

Phase 3 (Time frame: 12-18 months after Phase 2 completion)

Implement the findings of the humans caused ignitions feasibility study.

Next Steps: FEC members will consult with their constituents, and other FEC members, in preparation for final recommendations being passed to WFLC at the March 24th conference call.

Glossary:

Prescribed Fire: *Any wildland fire ignited by management actions to meet specific objectives. A written, approved prescribed fire plan must exist, and NEPA requirements (where applicable) must be met, prior to ignition.*

Protection: *The actions taken to limit the adverse environmental, social, political, and economical effects of fire.*

Suppression: *All the work of extinguishing or confining a fire beginning with its discovery.*

Use of Wildland Fire: *Management of either wildfire or prescribed fire to meet resource benefits specified in Land/Resource Management Plans.*

Wildfire: *An unplanned, wildland fire including unauthorized human-caused fires, escaped prescribed fire projects, and all other wildland fires where the objective is to protect values at risk while meeting resource benefits specified in Land/Resource Management Plans.*

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