

DRAFT

Ten-Year Comprehensive Strategy

***A COLLABORATIVE TEN-YEAR STRATEGY FOR RESTORING HEALTH TO
FIRE-ADAPTED ECOSYSTEMS***

Version 5, February 20, 2001

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Draft prepared by core group representatives (list attached) with input from attendees of January 2001 fire meeting hosted in Denver by the Western Governors' Association, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior

Ten-Year Comprehensive Strategy

A COLLABORATIVE TEN-YEAR STRATEGY FOR RESTORING HEALTH TO FIRE-ADAPTED ECOSYSTEMS

VISION

The risk of wildland fires to communities and watersheds is reduced by restoring and maintaining the health and resiliency of fire-adapted ecosystems through collaborative efforts at all levels. Wildfire awareness, preparedness, and protection capabilities further reduce the risk of wildland fires to communities.

HISTORY

On September 18, 2000, the governors of six western states¹ representing the Western Governors' Association, the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior, the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, and the Chief of the Forest Service met in Salt Lake City to discuss the 2000 fire season – its magnitude and what was needed to respond.

There were three unanimous agreements that came from the meeting. The first was support for the funding levels and direction in “Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment: A Report to the President in Response to the Wildfires of 2000.”

The second agreement was to collectively seek reimbursement for the extraordinary costs expended by the states in fire fighting.

The final agreement emerged from a lengthy discussion at the meeting. The governors and Secretaries agreed that there was a need to fundamentally change the way that public dollars are spent on our fire-adapted ecosystems. Rather than appropriating significant emergency supplemental appropriations that respond to wildfires after the fact, they agreed there should be a shift to investing in restoring the health of the forest ecosystems, starting as quickly as possible.

The governors and Secretaries were in agreement that the scale, intensity and nature of many of the Summer of 2000 fires (stand replacement/crown fires) were a type of fire behavior that was historically infrequent in fire-adapted ecosystems and were just one of many indicators of poor forest ecosystem health. Other symptoms include noxious weeds and invasive species, the decline of certain wildlife and aquatic species, and the significant fuel loadings in the thick, multi-level understory that is a major contributor of crown fires.

¹ Governors Dirk Kempthorne (ID), John Kitzhaber (OR), Jim Geringer (WY), Marc Racicot (MT), William Janklow (SD) and Mike Leavitt (UT).

There are treatments currently being practiced to reverse this trend of decline, though typically at an inadequate level. The Governors and Secretaries agreed that public dollars invested in increasing these treatments was a better investment than spending significantly higher levels of public funds to suppress and respond to the impacts of fire.

Guided by good science and a goal of restoring ecosystem health, many treatments could be done proactively to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, while simultaneously contributing to ecosystem health such as prescribed fire and understory thinning.

Reflecting their sense of urgency to take action to address forest ecosystem health, they agreed to set aside differences of opinion about the then-current roads/roadless proposal, salvage, and commercial timber sales. These could be discussed in other forums. Instead, they favored moving forward with an agreement that was not only achievable, but beneficial to the forest ecosystems and to the protection of public safety and property.

The governors and Secretaries therefore agreed that the federal agencies and the states should seek to establish a ten-year collaborative strategy to address the issue of restoring the health of the forest ecosystems, including the reduction of fuel loads where life and property may be threatened. Restoring rangeland ecosystems was subsequently added to the agreement.

Further, they agreed that decisions on the appropriateness of any particular methodology were best left to local studies and decision-making. Finally, because such work had great potential for employment at the local level, they agreed that the agencies should make every effort to use local contractors and workforces.

The result of this agreement was incorporated in the Interior and Related Agencies Appropriations committee report (FY 2001 Department of Interior and Related Agencies Appropriation Act Report Language, P.L. 104-291) as follows:

The Secretaries should also work with the Governors on a long-term strategy to deal with the wildland fire and hazardous fuels situation, as well as needs for habitat restoration and rehabilitation in the Nation. The managers expect that a collaborative structure, with the States and local governments as full partners, will be the most efficient and effective way of implementing a long-term program.

The managers are very concerned that the agencies need to work closely with the affected States, including Governors, county officials and other citizens. Successful implementation of this program will require close collaboration among citizens and governments at all levels. The managers direct the Secretaries to engage Governments in a collaborative structure to cooperatively develop a coordinated, National ten-year comprehensive strategy with the States as full partners in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the plan. Key decisions should be made at local levels.

Though the above report language reflected the governors' and Secretaries' agreement, Congress and the federal agencies were beginning to focus on the same issues. For example, on April 3, 1999 the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued the *Western National Forest: A Cohesive Strategy is Needed to Address Catastrophic Wildland fire Threats (GAO/RCED-99-65)* report that addressed reducing wildland fire risks and restoring forest health in the interior West on U.S. Forest Service lands. Their report concluded that the most extensive and serious problem related to the health of our national forests is the over-accumulation of vegetation. The U.S. Forest Service's response – *Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems: A Cohesive Strategy* identified a national level, strategic plan to address on public land wildland fire risks, forest and rangeland health issues and safety of the public and firefighters. The Department of Interior followed with a similar document entitled *Reducing the Risks and Consequences of Catastrophic Wildland Fires on DOI Lands*. In January of 2001, federal agencies and state foresters reviewed and updated the *1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy*.

(Suggested addition -- TRENDS INFORMATION & GRAPHICS - How we got here/range of issues/scope of the issue to tie into budget figures.)

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Collaborative Ten-year Strategy (the "Strategy") provides the components of a long-term strategy to deal with the wildland fire and hazardous fuels situation, as well as the needs for ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation in the nation. The Strategy lays out how we, as a nation, plan to restore and maintain ecosystem health in fire-adapted ecosystems across the nation. Its intention is to reduce the risk and consequence of catastrophic wildfire, better ensure public and firefighter safety, improve the resilience and sustainability of forests and rangelands at risk, and conserve and enhance species.

Support for the findings and guidance found in this Strategy is provided in the Western Governors' Association policy resolutions 99-011: "Improving Forest Ecosystem Health on Federal Lands." and 00-041: "Improving Forest Ecosystem Health on Federal Lands: Next Steps." In addition, WGA resolution 99-013: "Principles for Environmental Management in the West" provides valuable guidance for how to approach the challenge before us as we embark upon a major collaborative effort that may alter the way we have addressed problems for decades. Equally important federal support for the approach in this Strategy may be found in "Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment: A Report to the President In Response to the Wildfires of 2000" and the 2001 update of the *1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy*, as well as the cohesive strategy documents of the Forest Service and the Department of Interior.

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

To achieve healthy watersheds, healthy communities, and a diminished risk and consequences of catastrophic fires through collaborative capacity at multiple levels of government, the goals of the ten-year Strategy are: (goals listed are of equal importance)

- Reduce the risk and consequence of catastrophic wildfire, and increase public and firefighter safety;
- Improve conditions of fire-adapted ecosystems to make them more resilient;
- Promote local action by increasing public understanding and providing tools to enhance local responsibility;
- Maintain and enhance community health, economic, and social well-being;
- Increase resource protection capabilities;
- Provide for the restoration and rehabilitation of fire-damaged lands; and,
- Enhance collaboration/coordination among all levels of government and stakeholders for joint planning, decision-making and implementation.

EVALUATING PROGRESS

Indicators of success for each goal should be developed that further define the elements of each goal. These indicators will measure success and incorporate accountability in accomplishing the outcome of achieving healthy watersheds, communities, and diminishing the risk and consequences of catastrophic fire. The suggested indicators in Appendix I are potential aggregate categories that will help guide the development of meaningful field level indicators. The addition of specific regional or geographic subsets to these indicators will be an important step in ensuring that what is being measured is most appropriate to unique regional conditions and issues.

Each goal should ultimately have multiple indicators that reveal the degree to which goals and outcomes are achieved. Monitoring feedback is important not only in institutionalizing and documenting learning experiences, but for budget performance reporting at the federal level as well. Further work on specific indicators and measures will be tasked to a group that will coordinate monitoring for program success, document fiscal accountability for budget processes, and ensure the development and incorporation of field level indicators

Appendix I suggests aggregate indicator categories for each goal of the Strategy.

APPROACH

This Strategy will be employed to assure broad involvement of stakeholders; establish priorities that tier from national, state and local geographic levels; identify and incorporate sound science and monitoring needs at the local, state, and national levels; share collaborative, community based decision-making processes; and create the framework for reporting success. The following are specific sideboards to help direct this effort and should be considered in their entirety rather than separately:

- The federal, state, tribal, local governments, private landowners and other interested parties are treated as full partners in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of the Strategy. Wherever possible, existing networks should be utilized to implement this Strategy.

- The initial emphasis is on protecting communities and municipal and other high priority watersheds at risk. Plans made and actions taken should include willing state, tribal, and private lands in the urban wildland interface within or adjacent to federal lands. Out-year efforts will expand to restoring fire-adapted forest and rangeland ecosystem health and sustainability on a landscape scale. Activity priorities will be determined at the state/regional and local levels.
- The ability for tribal, state and local governments to participate in planning, decision-making and strategy implementation may not be consistent. Funds made available to assist this effort should be focused at the tribal, state and local level.
- This Strategy calls for reviews of contracting procedures and agreements, liability issues, National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act processes and other procedures for opportunities to improve their effectiveness and efficiency in meeting the goals of the Strategy. The results of these reviews should be reported to the Secretaries and Congress.
- This Strategy calls for commensurate funding to assure compliance with existing laws and regulations, particularly the National Environmental Policy Act, National Historic Preservation Act and the Endangered Species Act, which have significant workloads associated with the implementation of this Strategy.
- This Strategy for the restoration of forests, rangeland, streams and watersheds shall use and promote the development of the best available science (peer-reviewed science where available). Comprehensive, scientific analyses and assessments will be used to help identify at-risk watersheds and the appropriate treatments and level of activity. These practices are also useful for strategically focusing scarce human and financial resources.
- This Strategy acknowledges that while we have good science and some initial data from restoration efforts, there is much that we still do not know about restoring ecosystem health. Therefore, the Strategy integrates monitoring as a basic element. This data will facilitate and inform adaptive implementation of restoration efforts.
- Restoration activities may include: fuel reduction, prescribed fire; riparian restoration; invasive plants and noxious weeds treatments; and under-story thinning or other activities related to restoring fire-adapted ecosystems.
- The success of this Strategy is dependent on a solid base of fire suppression capabilities at all levels.
- The Strategy seeks adoption of incentives to promote better fire safe planning in local communities.

- The Strategy must include yearly performance goals, objectives, budget estimates for land ownerships and state participation, and time lines to implement the Strategy within the ten-year time frame.
- The Strategy shall include yearly reports to the President, the House and Senate Appropriations Committee, the authorization committees, the governors and legislative leaders of the states documenting the nature and extent of treatments (including acreages and types of activities). These reports shall be co-authored by all partners contributing to accomplishments under this Strategy.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

This section outlines three levels of activity: national, state/regional, and local levels. This Strategy recognizes that many existing forums and relationships already exist (e.g. resource advisory councils, watershed councils, and other established or ad hoc advisory groups) that are appropriate for this work as well. States/regions may approach this strategy differently based on these existing relationships.

National Level

A federal-state-tribal-county collaborative group will facilitate national activities supporting the Strategy. The primary role at this level is to:

- Maintain and enhance communication across collaborating organizations and groups;
- Facilitate national program planning and coordination;
- Address national issues and concerns related to overall program implementation and monitoring;
- Coordinate the implementation of the Strategy;
- Review accomplishments and monitor progress;
- Facilitate the establishment of collaborative multi-government/stakeholder groups;
- Communicate with Congress regarding program priorities and funding needs for on-the-ground project work, monitoring, and adaptive-collaborative planning. Budget estimates should include federal, state, tribal and local levels; and,
- Gather and disseminate information about available tools to expedite fire-adapted ecosystem health restoration and monitoring including scientific information.

State/Regional Level

The state/regional level addresses geographically focused communication, coordination and program planning among governments and stakeholders. The state/regional group:

- Assists and supports the establishment of collaborative multi-stakeholder groups at the local, community and watershed level;
- Coordinates across state and regional boundaries on issues such as air quality, water quality or habitat conservation that transcends those boundaries;

- Communicates with the national level regarding program priorities and funding needs for specific geographic project work, monitoring, scientific information, and adaptive-collaborative planning;
- Conducts project planning, implementation and monitoring among stakeholders to maximize funding efficiency and treatment of priority acres; and,
- Collects and disseminates information by providing national and state level program information to local and community groups.

Local Level

Local stakeholder groups would meet a broad range of interests, conditions, and geographic relationships. Examples include further subdivisions necessary to address different eco-regions, watersheds, landscapes, or sub-state differences. In time, it is anticipated that local structures will collaboratively develop the list of projects to be undertaken that will demonstrably contribute towards watershed restoration and hazardous fuels reduction. Stakeholder groups are expected to be broadly representative.

COMMUNICATION

This Strategy recognizes that key decisions in setting restoration and fire and fuel management priorities should be made at local levels. As such, there should be an ongoing process whereby the federal, state, tribal and local land management, scientific, and regulatory agencies disseminate the requisite technical information to inform this decision-making. At a minimum, this information should include assessment of the populations at risk, current vegetative conditions with respect to the likelihood of wildfire, threats to key habitat, water (such as post fire erosion), air quality and local economies.

This process should include specific outreach and coordination efforts that:

- Allow for complete and cooperative information sharing at all levels to assure maximum resource, policy, and scientific informational exchange;
- Coordinate with federal, state, tribal, and local governments and agencies and private landowners in documenting specific resource needs, goals, and objectives to aggressively pursue these issues through all programs; and,
- Develop special programs and conduct outreach to communicate to congressional, local, tribal, state and other governmental officials and provide them with the budget and operational needs of all proposed or developed programs.

BUDGET

Budget information to implement this Strategy will be developed by March 15, 2001.

APPENDIX I

GOALS AND INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

- **Reduce the risk and consequence of catastrophic wildfire, and increase public and firefighter safety.**

Incidence and effects of unwanted wildland fires are reduced. Fire is restored at appropriate intensity, frequency, and time of year; severe fire behavior and unwanted fire effects are reduced; and, initial attack success goals are achieved.

The fuel and burnable vegetation within the wildland/urban interface is modified to reduce the threat to public and firefighter safety. Through enhanced suppression capabilities, community protection is increased. General indicators could include: number of communities and homes made more fire resistant; decrease in property loss and damage due to wildland fire; increase in community, state and federal firefighting capabilities; and, exposure of firefighters to risk is reduced.

- **Improve conditions of fire-adapted ecosystems to make them more resilient.**

Ecosystem functions are restored to their normal range of variability and productivity. General indicator categories could include: increasing viable habitat for native species; maintaining and enhancing water quality; restoring soil condition and function; managing to minimize impacts of erosion, flooding, etc.; and reducing invasive species and noxious weeds.

- **Promote local action by increasing public understanding and the provision of tools that enhance responsibility at the local level.**

Improve public knowledge and perception of wildland fire. General indicators could include: appeals to planned projects are reduced; collaborative education and community outreach projects are increased and improved; government, stakeholder and public requests for information on programs and projects increase; community activism regarding wildland fire safety increases; homes with improved fire safety features increase; and, community covenants promoting wildland fire safety are improved and increased.

- **Maintain and enhance community health, economic, and social well-being.**

Community social and economic conditions are improved. Indicators could include: number of community contracts awarded; number of local jobs created; tons of fuel processed; and reduction in seasonal unemployment. Public health risks from smoke are reduced and airshed visibility is improved. Smoke impacts from wildland fires and prescribed fires are mitigated. Indicators could include episodes of air quality standards being exceeded, reduction in public health complaints due to smoke, and incorporation of smoke management in prescribed fire planning and implementation.

- **Increase resource protection capabilities.**

Community protection is increased through enhanced suppression capabilities at all levels. Fire preparedness programs focus on all aspects of readiness. Numbers of qualified personnel available for incidents at all levels is increased; interagency training opportunities are improved and increased; fire fighting infrastructure is enhanced and maintained (facilities, engines, equipment); fire fighting response capabilities are improved; and, budgets are increased and maintained at higher levels.

- **Provide for the restoration and rehabilitation of fire-damaged lands.**

All facets of rehabilitation and restoration of burned areas are supported by sufficient personnel and resources. Indicators could include: response time is shortened for rehabilitation teams and their availability is increased; numbers of trained team members are increased; and, emphasis is placed on fire suppression activities and strategies that mitigate potential damage to ecosystems.

- **Enhance collaboration among all levels of government and stakeholders for joint planning, decision-making, and implementation.**

Increased collaborative capacity at all levels of governance. General indicators could include number of completed collaborative plans with Federal, tribal, state and local involvement; stakeholder participation in planning, strategies and activities; and, increases in the number of agency land management plans that incorporate goals and objectives from the Strategy

(Suggested additional Appendix) GLOSSARY

Fire-adapted ecosystem

Catastrophic wildfire

Restoration

Rehabilitation

Wildland Urban Interface

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DRAFT: Version 5

February 20, 2001

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