

The Science Analysis of The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy

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National Guidance

The first element of this National Strategy is a set of heuristics or rules of thumb to provide basic guidance when planning activities. Such heuristics are meant to be broadly applicable and generally accurate, but not rigidly enforced when local circumstances suggest more prudent courses of action.

The first rule is that safe and effective response to wildfires must be the highest priority of the National Strategy. Placing priority on protecting the safety and health of the public and firefighters implies the need for, and assumption of, a safe and effective response organization. This presumes that immediate threats are the most important—and wildfires are an immediate threat throughout the country. Improving preparedness can take many forms. More equipment and personnel are obvious avenues to increasing preparedness, but improved coordination, communication, and training also enhance response efficiency, and belong in any prudent regional or national strategy. Large wildfires that threaten entire communities are relatively rare, yet their impact on public perception and the reality that large fires near communities can have catastrophic consequences requires special attention.

General guidance regarding response includes:

- Enhance wildfire response preparedness in areas more likely to experience large, long-duration wildfires that are unwanted or threaten communities and homes.
- Enhance wildfire response preparedness in areas experiencing high rates of structure loss per area burned.
- At the community level, emphasize both structure protection and wildfire prevention to enhance the effectiveness of initial response.

It would be shortsighted to assume that a safe and effective response to fire is the only priority. Indeed, one could argue that the suppression challenges today are symptomatic of more fundamental underlying issues. The current trajectory of increasing risk cannot be headed off by simply adding more preparedness and suppression resources.

The gradual accumulation of wildland fuels is perhaps the most difficult and challenging issue to address. An analogy can be made to walking up the down escalator. One has to be moving just to stay in place; the only way to move up is to move faster than the escalator is moving down. Current estimates of areas being treated intentionally or burned in wildfires suggest that fire-adapted landscapes are falling further behind in managing fuels. In some areas, the principal means of reducing fuels appears to have been unwanted wildfires over which we have little apparent control. Broad-scale efforts to reduce fuels across the landscape can be expensive and time-consuming, and require strategic coordination. Success will not be achieved overnight. Prescribed fire and managing wildfire for resource objectives have the greatest potential for treating large areas at lower cost than mechanical treatments, but use of fire entails greater inherent risk that must be addressed at a local level. Mechanical, biological, or chemical treatments play an important role wherever they are economically feasible.

General guidance regarding vegetation and fuels management include:

- Where wildfires are unwanted or threaten communities and homes, design and prioritize fuel treatments (prescribed fire, and mechanical, biological and chemical treatments) to reduce fire intensity, structure ignition and extent.
- Where feasible, implement strategically placed fuel treatments to interrupt fire spread across landscapes.
- Continue and expand the use of prescribed fire to meet landscape objectives, improve ecological conditions, and reduce the potential for high-intensity wildfires.
- Where allowed and feasible, manage wildfire for resource objectives and ecological purposes to restore and maintain fire-adapted ecosystems and achieve fire-resilient landscapes.
- Use and expand fuel treatments involving mechanical, biological, or chemical methods where economically feasible and sustainable, and where they align with landowner objectives.

Activities that focus on individual homes or structures and community-level protection are important components of the National Strategy. Efforts that engage communities in taking proactive action before wildfires engender public support, work in conjunction with other actions, enhance management flexibility in response, and are not necessarily expensive.

General guidance regarding homes and communities include:

- Promote community and homeowner involvement in planning and implementing actions to mitigate the risk posed by wildfire to communities and homes situated near or adjacent to natural vegetation.
- Emphasize proactive wildfire risk mitigation actions, such as CWPPs and other methods of comprehensive community planning, where new development and expansion into natural vegetation is occurring.

- Pursue municipal, county, and state building and zoning codes and ordinances that mitigate fire risk to protect life and property from wildfire.
- Ensure that wildfire mitigation strategies consider protection of community infrastructure and values, for example, municipal watersheds, cultural assets, viewsheds, parks, and transportation and utility corridors.

Finally, actions that focus on preventing human-caused ignitions are universally prudent. Human-caused ignitions are a widespread issue that is relatively inexpensive to affect, especially when prevention programs are carefully targeted. General guidance regarding prevention efforts can be summarized as:

- Emphasize programs and activities that prevent human-caused ignitions, whether accidental or incendiary, where these ignitions, combined with high levels of area burned, suggest the greatest need. Programs should be tailored to meet identified local needs.

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