

considered to qualify only for secondary coverage.

To provide optimal biological benefit to forests and rangelands, the timing and intensity of prescribed fire should resemble natural occurrence.

Historically, fires were often very large; however, current land-ownership patterns and the process of funding prescribed fire are not conducive to replicating this process. For example, it is difficult to have a landscape-size project without involving lands of another ownership, and there are barriers to spending agency funds on non-agency lands. And the system does not encourage managers to plan large projects with multiple benefits located entirely on agency lands, because participation is generally limited to those program areas that will provide support and funding.

Currently, there is no consistent method to determine the potential for a prescribed fire to escape, nor is there a mechanism to compare the values at risk from an escaped fire versus those at risk by continuing to exclude fire. When a prescribed fire does escape, the only way a private property owner can be compensated more than \$2,500 is to pursue a tort claim against the Federal government. To prevail, the damaged party must prove negligence on the part of the agency. This cumbersome process leads to ill will between the managing agency and neighboring landowners and adversely affects cooperation.

Managing for landscape health requires expansion of interagency prescribed fire programs. Agencies must make a commitment with highly qualified people, from leader to practitioner, and provide funding mechanisms to conduct the program. Federal agencies must foster a work force that understands the role of fire and, at the same time, raise the level of public understanding. Public opinion and perception may limit increases in interagency prescribed fire programs. Therefore, continued Federal efforts to work collaboratively with and educate private landowners, interest groups, and the media is paramount. Education efforts should focus on exposing the public to accurate information on the social and economic benefits that result when prescribed fire is used, how natural resources may be maintained, and the risks involved, including those associated with not taking any action. Total implementation may require that the public tolerate some smoke and accept a certain amount of fire in their environment as an investment in the long-term health of the land.

Goal—Implementation

Fire is accepted as a critical process in a fully integrated program to improve forest and rangeland health. Long-term public safety and healthy ecosystems are maintained through the use of fire on all ownerships. Through funding and staffing, agencies support a significant increase in the use of fire as a resource management tool where consistent with integrated land management plans and maintenance of public health.

Actions

Federal agencies will:

- Jointly develop programs to fund and implement an expanded program of prescribed fire in fire-dependent ecosystems.

- Facilitate the planning and implementation of landscape-scale prescribed burns across agency boundaries and seek opportunities to enter into partnerships with Tribal, State and private land managers where appropriate.

- Conduct all prescribed fire projects consistent with land and resource management plans, public health considerations, and approved prescribed burn plans.

- Implement the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) interagency prescribed fire qualification and certification system.

- Aggressively pursue the development of employee attitudes that support long-range, multi-resource management viewpoints through the use of training, performance elements, and experience.

- Seek authority to eliminate internal barriers to the transfer and use of funds for prescribed fire on non-Federal lands and among Federal agencies.

- Seek authority or provide administrative direction to eliminate barriers to carrying over from one year to the next all funds designated for prescribed fire.

Goal—Capability

Agencies collectively and cooperatively maintain an organization that can effectively plan and implement prescribed fire to meet resource management objectives.

Actions

Federal agencies will:

- Train and maintain a qualified and adequate work force to implement interagency prescribed fire projects and make them available when needed.

- Jointly develop simple, consistent hiring and contracting procedures for prescribed fire activities.

- Work with the Office of Personnel Management to acquire authority for

hazard-differential pay to compensate employees exposed to hazards while engaged in large-scale or complex prescribed fire activities.

- Clarify that prescribed fire positions qualify for primary coverage under special firefighter retirement and issue appropriate guidance to field offices.

- Make optimum use of available skills to ensure adequate focus, oversight, and safety for the prescribed fire program. Methods may include:

- Sharing personnel among agencies.

- Organizationally consolidating key fire skills within and among agencies.

- Minimizing collateral-duty assignments that compromise focus, oversight, and safety in the prescribed fire program.

- Jointly manage prescribed fire and suppression resources to ensure accomplishment of both activities concurrently.

- Explore old and new technologies that may reduce the labor-intensive nature of fire activities.

Goal—Risk Management/Support

Agencies within the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior support employees when properly planned and conducted prescribed fire projects have unfavorable outcomes.

Actions

- Federal agencies will:

- Jointly develop an assessment process that estimates the probability of success and/or failure associated with the use of prescribed fire and evaluates the potential positive and negative consequences. As a part of this process, the effects of not conducting the project will also be evaluated. Research will support this effort.

- Jointly establish partnerships and develop tools to assess, disclose, and mitigate risk from prescribed fires.

- Create an organizational climate that supports employees who implement a properly planned prescribed fire program.

- Relax current cumbersome, nonproductive requirements such as daily written management certification that a prescribed fire is burning within its prescription.

- Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture will seek legislation allowing rapid reimbursement for non-Federal losses resulting from prescribed fires.

Preparedness and Suppression

Situation

The business of fighting wildfires is costly, time-consuming, and often