

## Key Messages: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Wilderness: **Wilderness Fire**

**Background:** The upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Wilderness Act provides an opportunity to increase awareness of wilderness values, benefits, conditions, and management activities. There also will be opportunities to discuss the role of wilderness fire and how it is managed. To complement these presentations and discussions, the following key messages about wildland fire have been developed for outreach to federal employees, partners, and the general public:

1. The Wilderness Act mandates federal agencies to protect wilderness areas for the future and to preserve their wilderness character. Wildland fire has helped shape wilderness areas for millennia, making it an integral part of the landscape, particularly in fire-adapted ecosystems in the American West.
2. All wildland fires in wilderness areas are managed, with the response depending on the circumstances of each fire. Determining factors include firefighter and public safety, firefighting assets, and ecological and other values to be protected.
3. Wilderness fires may be managed for one or more resource objectives that can change as the fire spreads across the landscape and through time. The management response can be quite varied within the same fire depending on conditions on the ground.
4. Managing wildland fires to achieve resource objectives in wilderness areas can produce many benefits, especially in fire-adapted ecosystems. For example, fire creates a diverse mixture of habitats upon which many species depend. Because recently burned areas can reduce the severity and behavior of fire, they give managers more options when addressing wilderness fires in the future.
5. Like all wildfires, wilderness fires can impact people. Smoke can be a nuisance and may present health risks, visitors and outfitters can be forced to cancel or change trips, and fires that move out of wilderness may threaten homes and property. Managers can plan ahead before the fire season to mitigate and manage these risks. During a wilderness fire, they can take a wide variety of actions to protect life and property.
6. Federal agencies have decades of experience managing fires in wilderness for ecological benefits, and this experience grows each year. For example, the National Park Service reintroduced wildland fire to Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in 1968. The first fire approved by the Forest Service to be managed for wilderness benefits was in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in 1972.
7. U.S. Forest Service managers realize the benefits of allowing fire to play its natural role in wilderness areas but face many challenges in doing so, such as risk of fires in U.S. Forest Service wilderness areas burning onto lands under the jurisdiction of other agencies; fuel and weather

conditions conducive to uncharacteristic fires; lack of firefighting assets during periods of high wildfire activity, etc. Unfortunately, this often requires tradeoffs between long term benefits and short term risks. The agency will continue to actively seek opportunities to manage fire to achieve resource objectives in wilderness areas while meeting its responsibilities to protect life, property, and natural and cultural resources.

In summary, managers strive to manage fire as a natural process but also to mitigate adverse impacts. Management approaches continue to evolve as we learn from experience and research.