

Wildland Fire Use: Incentives and Disincentives

INTRODUCTION

There are Centers of Excellence in the Northern Region and elsewhere that have demonstrated reasoned and appropriate responses to the implementation of wildland fire use programs in the management of wilderness and other natural resources. The Bitterroot National Forest and Flathead National Forest have successfully championed the role of wildland fire use in wilderness over the years in the Northern Region. In the Southwest Region, the Gila National Forest has done an excellent job of establishing the natural role of fire in the Gila Wilderness. The National Park Service has commendable programs in place in Parks like Glacier, Sequoia and King's Canyon, and Yosemite. But there are many locations where the idea of wildland fire use has been slow to catch on; and occasionally a Line Officer will actually issue a Moratorium against wildland fire use.

A DOUBLE STANDARD SLOWS PROGRESS

The clarity of hindsight might move some to criticize resource management agencies for their slowness in responding to clear warnings that were sounded in the 1940's and 1960's by people like Weaver and Cooper. But that would be a simplistic assessment for a complex situation. Resource management and fire management policies, regulations, and practices evolve gradually over time and are affected by many internal and external expectations. The external expectations may come from society at large, politicians, and regulatory agencies. Many of the early internal and external expectations were founded on the calamities brought about by catastrophic fires in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Wildland fires were viewed as the enemy to be eradicated from the forests, not as a natural disturbance process with many benefits. The several era's of fire control and fire management from then to now have been carefully traced by Pyne (1982).

So it is not really surprising in the aftermath of the 1910 fires that an organizational culture developed that emphasized fire suppression programs over prescribed fire programs; program emphasis that was universally accepted by society. But in the intervening decades since 1910, a large body of scientific knowledge has developed regarding fire history, fire regimes, and fire effects; the decline in the health of ecosystems has reached alarming proportions; and large, high intensity wildfires are increasing in numbers since the mid-1980's (Figure 1).

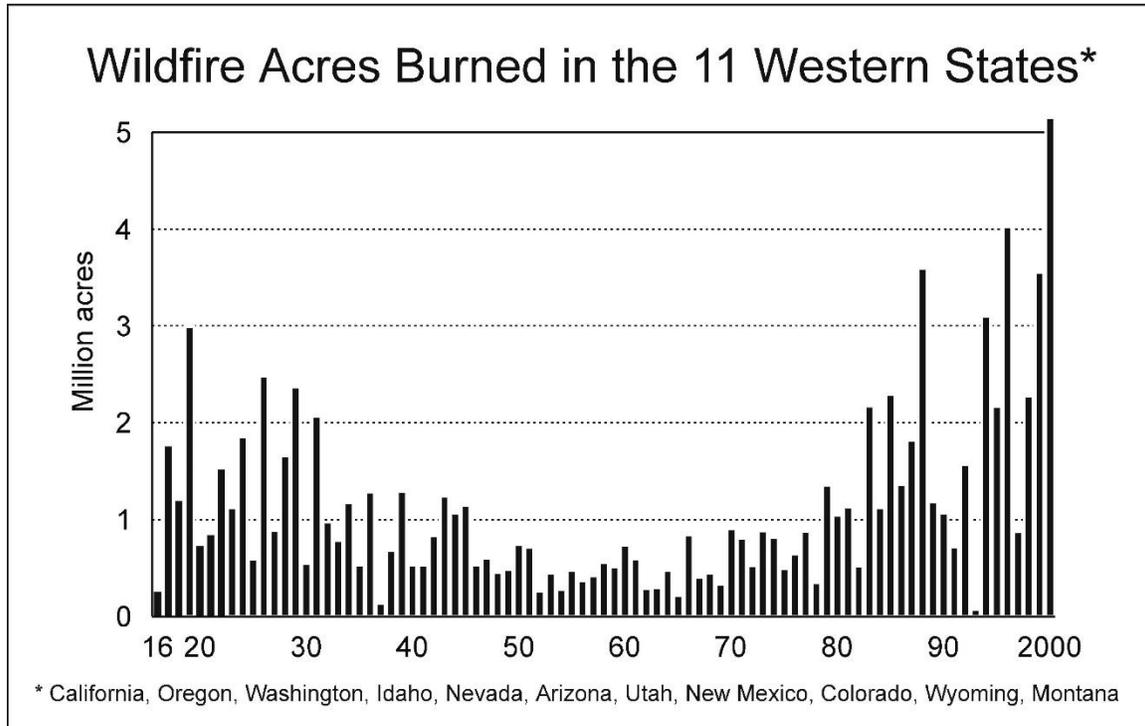


Figure 1. Total wildfire acres burned in the 11 western states on all Federal lands between 1916 and 2000.

A change in direction is clearly indicated--and that change has been embodied in the concept of ecosystem management where we attempt to sustain the productivity of all components of ecosystems, allowing society to benefit from the by-products of healthy systems. As we already have noted, recurring fire is an integral disturbance process to the functioning of fire-adapted ecosystems. But a double standard is impairing our ability to prescribe fire on the landscape in a large enough dose to truly sustain healthy systems. A prescribed fire, or wildland fire use, can be well-planned and well-executed by qualified people, but the moment something starts to go awry the support from politicians and the public is quickly lost. The reprisal is generally immediate because the agency started the fire and it is their fault if something goes wrong.

In contrast, practically any professional strategy can be adopted in suppressing a wildfire and vast amounts of money can be spent in implementing that strategy. No matter how adverse the outcome (including the burning of 200,000 acres and the destruction of over 1000 homes in southern California in 1993), politicians and the public generally side with the firefighter. This double standard is part of our tradition and culture, since wildfire suppression decisions are generously funded and essentially risk-free in the public arena, whereas prescribed fire implementation is much more closely scrutinized and carries a large risk. It is easy for the risk-averse manager to opt for wildfire suppression strategies that are risk-free and generously funded, rather than make positive wildland fire use decisions that carry their share of unknown future outcomes.

OUR PRESCRIBED FIRE FUTURE: CONFRONTING THE DOUBLE STANDARD

Different standards also are used by regulatory agencies to evaluate wildland fire programs. Thus, the wildfire and its smoke are considered exceptional events by the Environmental Protection Agency, and are not included in strategies to achieve clean air standards. We have learned by now that it is not a question of if we are going to have wildland fires, but simply a matter of when. And the wildfires are occurring at increasing frequencies and intensities, producing large volumes of smoke over extensive areas. Wildfire smoke is the bad smoke. This doesn't mean that prescribed fire smoke is good smoke, but it may be better smoke if emissions can be timed to mitigate the future production of unregulated wildfire smoke. Interface residents, air and water quality regulators, endangered species specialists, and resource managers need to plan for the "when" of fire occurrence.

An enlightened tolerance on the part of all sectors of society needs to accommodate prescribed fire and wildland fire use on a landscape scale, coupled with other management practices, as part of the solution in sustaining healthy ecosystems to benefit people. This will require confronting the numerous barriers imposed either directly or indirectly by the double standard, and seeking appropriate solutions that better balance essential and strong fire suppression programs with equally well-supported prescribed fire and wildland fire use programs. The list of elements receiving preferential treatment under the double standard is a varied one: liability, air quality, water quality, threatened and endangered species, risks, and funding. In most cases these considerations do not hamper operational practices in suppressing a wildfire. But this very same list can pose distinct barriers to prescribed fire practices.

THE WEST FORK DISTRICT—BITTERROOT NATIONAL FOREST

I visited with District Ranger Dave Campbell, April 2005, about the incentives and disincentives for wildland fire use. During Dave's tenure on the West Fork District he has made numerous decisions successfully implementing wildland fire use in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. He listed the following as incentives for strong implementation of wildland fire use in the management of wilderness:

1. The long tradition of wildland fire use on the District made it easy for him to follow in the footsteps of those who preceded him. The pilot wildland fire use project in the Forest Service occurred in the White Cap drainage in Idaho in the 1970's.
2. He indicated that there is a "comfort zone" for the Line Officer to operate due to widespread support.
3. One of the most compelling incentives for Dave in carrying out the program is because it is the right thing to do for fire-adapted ecosystems in wilderness.
4. He said that "Go" decisions on wildland fire use are an ethical responsibility.

5. Recognition by others that the risk-attendant decisions are important ones to make.
6. Mentoring others through workshops, training, and one-on-one consultations are satisfying parts of extending wilderness management knowledge to others.

In terms of why some managers see disincentives in implementing wildland fire use in a meaningful way, he listed the following:

1. People with “career aspirations” shy away from the risks associated with wildland fire use. Career advancement can become highly competitive.
2. Some people are just naturally risk-averse.
3. The long duration of decision consequences interjects a strong element of the unknown.¹
4. Some managers shy away from implementation due to an unfamiliarity with fire.
5. Disincentives in terms of post-fire re-hab and trail maintenance. Wildland fire use does not receive the generous funding for these activities that a wildfire does, thus, such activities following a wildland fire use event must come from scarce project dollars.

CONCLUSIONS

Obviously there are good examples that can be looked to for leadership in wildland fire use. But until wildland fire use is made a high priority in the minds of Line Officers, the risk-averse individual will be able to neglect to implement wildland fire use without any personal consequences. High level decision makers could make a stronger stand for sound ecosystem-based land stewardship.

¹ Unlike the decision to suppress, the WFU decision is a decision to live with that fire for the rest of the fire season.