

The Role of Prescribed Fire: Report of Futuring Group 6¹

Fire is a natural element of the wildland ecosystem. Total exclusion of fire from the wildland creates an unnatural condition: an excessive buildup of decadent and overmature vegetation.

KEY TRENDS

1. Increasing conflict between the definition of "unwanted" and "wanted" fire. Belief that all fire is bad and unwanted is giving way slowly to the understanding that fire is necessary and natural.

2. Only a very small percentage of unwanted fires occurring under unusual or extreme conditions are causing the majority of losses and damages.

3. Fire suppression costs are escalating to exorbitant and unacceptable levels.

4. Fire management philosophies are recognizing "cost versus loss" evaluations in strategy and command decisionmaking.

5. Need for effective prescribed burning to minimize the threat of major destructive conflagrations.

6. The perception of all wildfire as destructive is giving way to a unified view of positive and negative impacts and benefits.

7. Analyzing the benefit/cost ratio of prescribed fire and wildfire is leading to a significant increase in prescribed burning.

8. Increase in the number of wildfires being managed for their fire related benefits and in the total acreage burned.

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9. Decrease in fire size and intensity of destructive conflagrations, in catastrophic fire dollar damages, and in ultimate net suppression costs.

KEY VISIONS AND ASSOCIATED STRATEGIES

Public Influence

Public influence in encouraging prescribed fire programs would intensify.

Strategies are these:

- The National Wildfire Coordinating Council (NWCG) to establish a public information and education program based on the positive benefits of prescribed burning.
- Environmental, taxpayer, and special interest groups to support prescribed burning due to its essential role in the natural environment and the necessity to reduce suppression costs.
- A new and aggressive public relations campaign to achieve public understanding and acceptance of fire's positive role.
- Fire agencies to contract for "Madison Avenue" type public information campaigns. Caricature image of the "Friendly Flame."
- Widespread use of prescribed burning and the treatment of certain wildfires as prescribed burns.

Air Quality

Prescribed fire management would be an effective method of minimizing critical periods of air quality degradation by controlled timing and pollutant dispersion management.

Strategies are these:

- Research to identify types, amounts, and chemical species of airborne pollutants and their specific impacts on air quality.
- Fire management agencies to cooperate and coordinate in achieving effective technology transfer.
- Fire management agencies to play an active and crucial role in lobbying for realistic smoke management regulation.
- Train all users of prescribed fire in smoke management techniques through NWCG. Develop a consolidated and interagency Prescribed Fire Management Handbook.

Economics

Economics would play an increased role in evaluating fire management policies. Costs, values, and potential losses would be considered in balance to determine prescribed fire management versus fire suppression policies.

Strategies are these:

- Calibrate more accurately the costs of fire suppression and measure them against potential losses.
- Use prescription management as an option to full suppression (i.e., allow the fire to progress to natural containment points as if the same area were burned under a planned prescription).

- Develop standardized cost/benefit/loss elements for prescribed fire and wildfire.

Training and Certification

There would be increased scrutiny, both internally in the fire agencies and from the public. Accountability for fire management policy and strategies would increase.

Strategies are these:

- Develop prescribed fire qualification and certification standards for fire personnel.
- Establish prescribed fire practitioners both in agencies and in the private sector.
- Increase experience of prescribed fire management professionals by training, qualification, and certification programs. Training will be available to both public and private sector personnel.
- NWCG to play an integral role in fostering coordinated training and the development of the Prescribed Fire Management Handbook.