

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE): Torchbearers for a New Fire Management Paradigm

Timothy Ingalsbee¹, Joseph Fox², and Patrick Withen³

Abstract—Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) is a nonprofit organization promoting safe, ethical, ecological wildland fire management. FUSEE believes firefighter and community safety are ultimately interdependent with ethical public service, wildlands protection, and ecological restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems. Our members include current, former, and retired wildland firefighters, other fire management specialists, fire scientists and educators, forest conservationists, and other citizens who support FUSEE's holistic fire management vision. FUSEE's primary function is to provide public education and policy advocacy in support of a new, emerging paradigm that seeks to holistically manage wildland fire for social and ecological benefits instead of simply "fighting" it across the landscape. We seek to protect fire-affected wildlands, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and enable fire management workers to perform their duties with the highest professional, ethical, and environmental standards. Our long-term goal is the creation of fire-compatible communities able to live safely and sustainably within fire-permeable landscapes.

Introduction

Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) is a nonprofit organization promoting safe, ethical, and ecological wildland fire management. FUSEE believes firefighter and community safety are ultimately interdependent with ethical service by public agencies and private companies, and environmental protection and restoration of fire-adapted ecosystems. Our members include current and former firefighters, other fire managers and workers, fire scientists and educators, forest conservationists, and other citizens who support FUSEE's holistic fire management vision.

Triad of Safety, Ethics, and Ecology

FUSEE's alternative fire management mission is based on an interdependent *triad* of safety, ethics, and ecology (fig. 1 is our organization logo).

Figure 1—The FUSEE logo exhibits the triad of Safety, Ethics, and Ecology.



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¹ Executive Director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, Eugene, OR. fire@efn.org.

² Board President of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology, McCall, ID.

³ Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Virginia at Wise, Wise, VA.

Management actions that degrade ecosystems or waste taxpayer resources adversely affect firefighter and community safety. For example, use of taxpayer dollars and resources on deficit timber sales that remove fire-resilient old-growth trees and leave behind untreated logging slash, violate Federal environmental laws in planning or implementation, or are labeled as “fuels reduction” or “forest restoration” projects when they actually increase fuel hazards or degrade ecological integrity—we believe this is an *ethical* as well as an ecological issue. These kind of antiecological, unethical forest management projects also adversely affect firefighter and community safety by diverting limited Federal dollars away from genuine hazardous fuels reduction activities, and by degrading ecological conditions in ways that increase wildfire rate of spread, intensity, or severity. Ethical and efficient use of taxpayer resources coupled with environmental protection and ecological restoration are the best strategies for improving the safety and working conditions of wildland firefighters. Thus, safety, ethics, and ecology are interconnected values in FUSEE’s holistic vision of forest and fire management.

FUSEE Mission: A New Fire Management Paradigm

FUSEE’s mission is to promote safe, ethical, and ecological wildland fire management, and we seek to enable fire management workers to perform their duties with the highest professional, ethical, and environmental standards. Our primary function is to provide policy analysis and public education in support of a new, emerging paradigm that seeks to holistically manage wildland fire for social and ecological benefits instead of simply “fighting” it across the landscape. We want to end modern industrial society’s socially conditioned fear of forest fires, and instead, wisely use fire on the landscape to benefit a multitude of ecosystem functions and processes, vegetative communities and wildlife habitats, as well as our own human communities and economies. Our long-term goal is the creation of fire-compatible communities able to live safely and sustainably within fire-permeable ecosystems.

Efforts to fundamentally shift the policy debates and change the paradigm of fire management will not work if efforts are focused solely on “top-down” strategies that appeal only to policymakers in Congress or the Administration. Unless and until public attitudes and opinions about wildland fire are changed from the “*bottom up*,” progressive fire policy reforms will continue to be blocked or reversed—as evidenced by the use of wildfire to justify the roll back of environmental protection laws and regulations. Consequently, FUSEE believes in the strategic, long-term importance of educating the public, policymakers, and the press about fire ecology, and empowering people to become actively involved in fire management policies and practices.

Educating and empowering people to become informed stakeholders actively involved in fire management programs would have a number of practical benefits for land and fire managers, particularly given shrinking levels of staffing and funding within Federal agencies. For example, fire managers would benefit from greater stakeholder involvement in fire management planning when information from scientists provides the most current references from the literature, when indigenous communities offer place-based traditional ecological knowledge, and when residents give local knowledge of valued natural assets and human developments. This input would help managers better understand the local values-at-risk needed to prioritize fuels

reduction and forest restoration projects, and devise suppression strategies and tactics. Greater stakeholder involvement in fire policy formation at regional and national levels would also nurture more public commitment to fire management programs—for example, taxpayer funding streams needed for long-term monitoring, research, and restoration projects. Expanding the number and kind of stakeholders actively involved in fire planning and policy development should above all include ground-level wildland firefighters—arguably the stakeholders with the most at stake in sound policies and practices. Fundamentally, the expansion of informed public involvement in all aspects of wildland fire management is an ethical calling for an expansion of democratic principles and processes.

FUSEE has a four-pronged approach to our education and advocacy work:

- First, FUSEE proactively **engages journalists and public opinionmakers** with information they can use in reporting on a broader range wildland fire issues. We emphasize working with the news media because the media are often the source of inaccurate, one-sided information and sensationalist stories that intensify the public's socially conditioned fear of wildfire. We promote alternative and investigative journalism that explores the vast breadth of fire management issues that are being neglected by the media's near-exclusive focus on emergency wildfire suppression. Our Web site (www.fusee.org) features a handbook, "A Reporter's Guide to Wildland Fire" (Ingalsbee 2005) that provides journalists with resources such as alternative story angles and new language in order to wean them away from their hackneyed use of the "war metaphor" and "catastrophe mentality" in reporting on wildfire events. We work to get reporters to expand their usual sources—official press spokespersons in fire camp—and get journalists out on the frontlines talking to ground-level firefighters, prescribed fire crews, fire effect monitors, fire planners, and other fire management workers who can articulate the diversity of fire management issues.
- Second, FUSEE actively **informs and empowers fire management workers**, especially ground-level wildland firefighters, to stand up and speak out on behalf of wildlands protection and ecosystem restoration not only in the public arena but also out on the fireline. Even minor changes in the location or intensity of fireline construction, for example, can have major effects on the impacts to soils, streams, and vegetation. We seek to change both the methods and the culture of fire management from the bottom up and inside out by instilling a renewed sense of civic duty and a new identity among firefighters as *forest protectors* and *restoration workers*. From their position on the frontlines of fire management, ground-level firefighters have the potential to fundamentally change their mission from the ground up and perform their duties with the highest professional, ethical, and environmental standards. The FUSEE Web site (www.fusee.org) hosts critical fire science papers, fire policy documents, fire education materials, personal essays, and an interactive "blogger" site that helps raise the ethical and environmental awareness of firefighters and citizens, and discusses such things as the interrelationship between firefighter safety and forest ecosystem health. This investment in firefighter education helps mitigate the firefighting damage done to forests in the present, and nurtures the kind of educated, empowered forest/fire restoration workforce needed for the future. Our hope is that one day *fire-fighters* will become something

more like “fire-*guiders*,” adept at starting prescribed fires and steering wildland fires rather than just suppressing wildfires, and envision that the label “firefighter” will become as anachronistic in the future as the label “smokechaser” is today.

- Third, FUSEE **informs policymakers and decisionmakers** about fire ecology and management issues, and advocates for alternative ecological restoration policies that improve the health, safety, and working conditions of wildland firefighters. In general, policymakers propose fire-related legislation and regulations without ever consulting with wildland firefighters—arguably the “stakeholders” with the most at stake in having sound fire management policies. FUSEE approaches policymakers from the perspective of ground-level firefighters and veteran fire management experts, most of whom work for low pay, few job benefits, and have little job security. Fire management workers facing hazardous and unhealthy working conditions are often forced to do environmentally destructive activities that do not serve the public interest, yet they often feel disenfranchised, voiceless, and powerless to improve their working conditions or alter their work tasks. FUSEE offers a safe vehicle for firefighters in public agencies and private companies to speak out on fire-related policies and legislation without fearing job reprisals.
- Finally, FUSEE **educates homeowners and rural residents** living in fire-prone areas about their *rights* and *responsibilities* to manage defensible space and use fire-resistant building materials. Our Web site features “A Homeowner’s Guide to Fire-Resistant Home Construction” (Fairbanks and Ingalsbee 2005) that provides tips on vegetation management and home construction to reduce the risks of wildland fire damage. We work to transcend the current defensive, narrow focus on “community wildfire protection,” and instead, promote proactive community fire *preparation* for the whole array of fire management including prescribed fire, wildland fire use, as well as wildfire suppression. The sooner homes and communities are prepared for fire, the sooner ecosystems can be restored with fire. Our long-term vision is the creation of “*fire-compatible communities*” dwelling within ecologically restored “*fire permeable landscapes*” where wildland fire can safely move through fire-dependent ecosystems without causing property damage.

Conclusions

FUSEE informs, inspires, and empowers wildland firefighters, other fire management workers, and their citizen supporters to become *torchbearers for a new paradigm in fire management*. We seek a paradigm shift not only in management policies and practices, but in society’s relationship with wildland fire. We work to end the public’s fear of wildfire by providing information on how to protect homes and communities from wildfire damage, how native ecosystems depend upon and benefit from fire, and how society benefits from genuinely managing fire instead of endlessly “fighting” it. We also educate the press, policymakers, and the public about the safety risks, economic costs, and environmental impacts of reactive wildfire suppression, making the case for proactive ecological fire restoration to reduce the risks, costs, and impacts of firefighting. Most important, we educate firefighters and the public they serve about the many benefits from practicing safe, ethical, ecological fire

management, with the goal of crafting a new identity and mission for firefighters as forest protectors and restoration workers. We invite members of the wildland fire management and forest conservation communities to visit our web site and become members and contributors of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology.

References

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