

**REPORT BY THE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FOREST SERVICE RETIREES
ON
U.S. FOREST SERVICE
WILDFIRE PROTECTION CAPABILITIES
March 1, 2001**

The Forest Service is rapidly losing its ability to provide adequate fire protection to National Forests and other lands. This decade-long decline dramatically increases the potential for **catastrophic** fire damage to natural resources and property as well as increasing life threats to citizens and firefighters. This assessment is based upon internal Forest Service reports, other fire agencies' observations, comments from wildland firefighters, and observations of members of the National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR). (See attached list of individuals contributing to this report with one sentence biography.)

The Forest Service's Cooperative Fire Protection Program and Fire Research have also suffered serious cutbacks. Reductions in both programs have contributed to increased national wildfire damage. State and local fire agencies are experiencing similar declines in wildfire protection capability.

Further complicating National Forest fire protection are two recent Forest Service policy changes. . . the **Roadless Area Decision** and the **National Forest Road Management Policy**. Forest Service leadership gave little consideration to fire protection with these policy changes.

Solving these problems will take a number of years, but it is critical that no time is lost in getting started. A major increase in federal fire funding by Congress in 2000 was a good beginning. A return to effective fire protection will require continuing commitment by Congress, a significant change of attitude by Forest Service leadership, and time to reestablish the capability of the Forest Service to protect people and the land from the ravages of fire.

The NAFSR believes these four critical factors need consideration in order to reverse fire program declination: Fire Policies, Fire Leadership, Fuels Management, and Personnel. A brief discussion of each follows:

I. Forest Service Fire Policies

At one time fire policy was clear. All fires were to be controlled by 10:00 AM the next day. Current policies are much less clear. In spite of extensive publicity and discussion, there is still uncertainty and skepticism among F.S. employees, fire cooperators, local citizens and the general public about what the current policy really means. Internal and public debate about "good" or "bad" fire continues. Debate is fine, but not while fire is uncontrolled.

Major shifts in Fire Policies are appropriate only following a combination of research and validation through field experience. The Forest Service has failed to provide the required work to substantiate needs or likely results from Fire Policy revisions.

It is essential that the Chief of the Forest Service clearly tell employees and the public that wildfires will be prevented when possible, suppressed promptly, and prescribed fire will be used safely to accomplish resource objectives.

NAFSR members believe it is important that the Chief make clear to employees that **prevention** and **control** of wildfire is the agency's highest priority in National Forest management. Fighting fires should be a mandatory requirement for all trained employees.

II. Fire Leadership:

The current Forest Service leaders in Washington, D.C. and a significant number of line officers in the field have minimal wildland fire knowledge or experience. Wildland fire is the most powerful and unforgiving change-agent that can impact the land. At its worst, it is also a killer of people.

NAFSR members believe it is unacceptable to permit people to occupy line officer or leadership positions if they lack the will or the qualifications to redeem their responsibilities for fire management. Position descriptions should include these requirements and performance evaluations should reinforce them. Reestablishing post-fire management reviews of large and damaging fires is also necessary.

III. Fuels Management:

Congressional funding of a major federal fuels program is commendable. However, NAFSR members are concerned that Congress may expect an unattainable short-term miracle, given the scope and complexity of the fuels management challenge. Forest fuels are more than just trees, but include all forms of vegetation, which adds to the complexity of treatment. The management of wildland fuels for resource health and fire protection is much more than a "cool burning" fire, creeping through the woods. Prescribed fire must often be intensely "hot" to be successful. This type of burning always has risks and high costs.

Once the prescription for burning is completed, whether "hot" or "cool", the wait for the right burning conditions may be days, weeks or not even occur in a given year. Cutting corners on prescribed fires to meet a budget target for burning, often results in very damaging, escaped fires. Prescribed burning is a valid fuel reduction technique on some areas. However, treatments such as logging, grazing, commercial thinning, etc. may often be the best choice with less risk and expense, while producing products with commercial value.

The scope of the needed fuels management program in the United States is massive, and will require years to accomplish. Literally millions of acres are in dire need of treatment. Forest managers must be able to use all available treatment options and have adequate funding that is dependable over time.

IV. Personnel:

The Forest Service has an increasing shortage of people with the necessary wisdom, training, and experience to carry out its fire mission. Fire management has lost approximately 60% of its senior fire managers and fire overhead during the last five years. Many senior fire suppression managers were from the "militia" (people working in other disciplines, but also qualified as firefighters).

Unit consolidations have made it impossible for line officers and their staffs to know their areas like "the back of their hand". Emphasis has been on building teams to handle large fires rather than organizing, staffing, and training local people (Forest Service and residents) to attack and control fires while they are small.

Replacing and training senior fire managers and "militia" is a slow and expensive process. The Forest Service needs to return to the requirement that every employee has a responsibility to help to the best of his or her ability in the fire effort. It needs to train and place people as fast as possible to regain effectiveness in fire management. It needs to reverse Ranger District and National Forest consolidations, so that people who truly know their area and their neighbors, staff every district. They can then take effective, cooperative action to attack all fires while they are small.

Recommendation:

NAFSR believes an independent national assessment of the Forest Service's fire management programs chartered by the Secretary of Agriculture would bring clarity and focus to fire problems faced by the agency. The review objective should be to measure the ability of the Forest Service to carry out Federal National Wildland Fire Policies, redeem its responsibilities for Cooperative Fire Protection, Fire Research and protection of the National Forests.

Team members should be people with wildland fire expertise selected from the National Association of State Foresters, National Fire Protection Association, National Governors Association, Private Sector Fire Contractors, National Association of Forest Service Retirees, National Conservation Community, Wildland Fire Research, Natural Resource Industries, and Outdoor Recreation businesses and the Forest Service's fire staff.

The assessment focus should be on field locations where members can talk with people involved in managing Forest Service fire programs, and view the challenges and accomplishments by resource and fire management.

The assessment report should provide the Secretary of Agriculture with recommendations for direction to the Chief of the Forest Service for specific actions to restore the Forest Service's ability to carry out its fire management mission.

Contributors:

This briefing paper was prepared from comments and observations by some 50-fire veterans from across the United States. Many were Forest Service retirees, but there was also a cross section of wildland fire people still actively involved in wildland fire programs with state, local and private sector fire organizations. Their common bond was, "They have been there and done that." NAFSR is grateful to these individuals who were willing to take the time to share their thoughts about Forest Service fire programs.

References:

Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy 1995(January 2000 Review)*

U. S. Forest Service: An Agency Strategy for Fire Management-January 2000*

U. S. Forest Service: Policy Implications of Large Fire Management: A Strategic Assessment of Factors influencing Costs-January 2000*

U.S. Forest Service: Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire Adapted Ecosystems, A Cohesive Strategy-December 1999*

National Association of State Foresters: Efficient Utilization of Wildland Fire Suppression Resources-July 2000**

*Complete reports available at: www.fs.fed.fs/fire/library.shtml

**Complete report available at:www.stateforesters.org/reports/Costs_Containment.html

National Forest Burned Area:

1999: 717,679 ac.

All federal land: 5,661,976

2000: 2,252,669 ac.

All federal land: 7,314,822