

A Challenge Still Unmet:

**A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT
OF THE POLICY RESPONSE
TO WILDLAND FIRE**

THE FIRES NEXT TIME



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“The fire community is notorious for dealing better with things than with people, for thinking with their hands, even as they admit their core “challenges” are social and political. Instead, they look for technological fixes where institutional reforms may be more fundamental. In recent years, they have cranked out a metric ton of high-quality studies on policy without probing the fundamental political ecology of fire. They insist on ‘science-based’ solutions, even though the crux of most disputes—the bottlenecks in moving plans into the field—lies in a politics charged by disputes over ethics and esthetics. They thus often treat public opinion as though it were an overgrown woods, needing only a suitable prescription for silvi-social thinning in order for an agreement to emerge, a problem that can be ‘solved’ by proper ‘social science’ research. This mind-set only prolongs the agony.”

Stephen J. Pyne, Ph.D., 2003

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INTRODUCTION

After the historic 2000 fire season, the Andrus Center for Public Policy and the *Idaho Statesman* convened a conference, *The Fires Next Time*, which brought together fire experts, state and local officials, the insurance industry, timber executives, and environmentalists. We wanted answers to the vexing dilemma: how to change policy to begin to prevent these almost annual catastrophic fires.

Those discussions brought a remarkable degree of consensus. Everyone agreed that we must shift from a federal policy that reacts to fire to one that adopts proactive measures to reduce fire threats to western communities. Three years later, it is painfully obvious that progress on change has been glacially slow.

In 2003, it was California's turn to suffer through an unusually devastating fire season. In 12 days, 22 people were killed, 183 firefighters were injured, 3,500 homes were lost, and more than 740,000 acres of forest and brush lands were consumed. In the rest of the West, the 2002 fire season was nearly as fierce as the 2000

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season. All of these fires confirm the reality addressed in *The Fires Next Time*: The West faces huge fires and huge consequences for decades unless it can learn how to manage fire and people.

Both funding shortfall and political disagreements have slowed the pace of meaningful efforts to thin, log, and burn western forests. Budget shortfalls are likely to continue to hamper fire policy reform efforts although money is not the major issue. The Bush Administration's effort to curb the agencies' blank check is a good first step, but it needs a detailed plan for reform that will probably cost at least as much as the current system. Congress approved President Bush's "Healthy Forests Initiative," which would direct \$762 million in federal funds to thinning projects. The law, which sends 50% of the money to areas near communities, moves the debate back toward the consensus of 2000, but it still falls short of the full-scale return that is necessary to address this challenge.

First, coordination and cooperation among federal agencies must improve, and natural bureaucratic aversion to change must be overcome. *Next*, completing fire management plans that allow managers to make good decisions about what fires to fight aggressively and what fires to monitor must become a high priority in all the agencies. *Third*, funding must be prioritized and sent to the region where the problem exists, the West, instead of being politically divided nationwide. *Finally*, local government and individual homeowners must take more responsibility to protect themselves.

The best that can be said regarding this pace of policy change is that the same old political disagreements will serve to narrow the scope of where thinning and logging activities will take place. Environmentalists, forest agencies, local officials, the timber industry, and others may well be able to agree on some fire prevention projects, but the agreements will be project by project, for the most part. We simply must do more. We must display the political and management will to force additional progress—and we must do it quickly. The new forest health legislation will test this will.

Our fire fighters do good and noble work, and they deserve our thanks. Many are also receiving hazard pay, which they clearly deserve, but the extra dollars in the pay envelope help explain some of their eagerness to stay on

fire duty. Meanwhile, important other work in the forest, including basic decision-making, slows down dramatically during the summer fire season. Many of the delays in proactive thinning and fire prevention programs are a result of the fact that project planners are off fighting fires.

Unless Congress is prepared to increase substantially the size of the Forest Service and to separate fire suppression efforts from the forest restoration programs, this will be a continuing problem. Taking those two steps would be one way to reduce the gridlock. Still, at the root of all questions about fire, we find profound disagreement over the purposes of the national forests and over the methods of forest management.

In a number of areas, including Idaho, discussions have begun over the issue of small wood. There does seem to be agreement that getting smaller-diameter wood off the forests makes sense, helps prevent catastrophic fires, addresses forest health issues, and supports local economies. More needs to be done in developing markets that can utilize the small-diameter wood. This is a project that both environmentalists and industry should be able to embrace. Policy makers could mandate the use of rustic log fencing on public forest roads or wood erosion stabilizers for use in burned-out gullies. Increasing use of this type of wood fiber could be made in particle board manufacturing, in log homes, and in power generation.

Perhaps the most important way to move policy change along is to concentrate on areas of agreement: *Concentrate* immediate efforts close to communities at risk in order that trust can be built. *Encourage* private property owners to aggressively protect their own homes. *Detail* Smokey the Bear—the Forest Service’s most effective spokesman—to work telling homeowners, “Only you can protect your home from wildfire.”

Finally, leaders of the environmental community, the timber industry, unions, and local governments need to acknowledge that the forest wars of the last century are over. The Bush Administration could encourage this dialogue with an honest assessment: *Industrial forestry on national forests is largely a thing of the past. Today, restoration, forest health, and fire prevention are the jobs of the U. S. Forest Service, and all the parties must get on board.*

Westerners are in the midst of a crisis that demands a willingness to take risks, show leadership, and act immediately. If we don’t get on with the change in policy, the priceless forests we all love will be lost for generations, and the cost to people and property will continue to be frightful.

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THE FIRES NEXT TIME

*Thursday, December 7, 2000
Boise State University
Boise, Idaho*

*Presented by:
The Andrus Center for Public Policy
The Idaho Statesman*

In December of 2000, the Andrus Center for Public Policy convened a conference that sought to examine the history, science, and policy of fire management. The severity of the 2000 fire season was the inspiration for the conference. The Chief of the U. S. Forest Service, Dale Bosworth, later noted that the conference helped begin a conversation that would lead to the development of a comprehensive strategy to address the growing risks from wildland fires. The Andrus Center issued a white paper on the conference, one that presented a number of findings based on what was said and promised that day.

After three fire seasons and a change in presidential administration, it's time to revisit those findings to see what has happened since then. In several cases, our original findings have been combined to reflect events more accurately events that have occurred since the conference.

FINDING NO. 1: We need to rethink our beliefs and myths about fire. In many cases, fire belongs on the western landscape. Fire is often not as bad as we have historically thought it to be.

It keeps being said, but it hasn't happened yet. There is a role for fire, but it seems likely that what are perceived as "catastrophic" fires in the media makes that message hard to hear. During the 2002 fire season, for example, governors, such as Jane Hull of Arizona, called for more fire fighters.





To Steven J. Pyne, our conference keynoter, the problem remains much as it did three years ago. As he recently noted, “Unless someone begins the task of re-centering fire and fire management within the larger culture, all its research will either become the political equivalent of money-laundering or be frittered away in a frenzy of hot-spotting.” (Pyne, 2003)

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It is also clear that fire is but one tool to be used by managers as they attempt to implement the forest health legislation. What is more, it cannot be used everywhere. Some forests, for example, are not suitable for fuel treatments designed to alter fire behavior.

FINDING NO. 2: The conflict between prescribed burning and air quality regulations must be reconciled.

As noted by National Wildfire Coordinating Group in its Fire Effects Guide:

The effects of smoke on health, air quality, and regional haze is very important to all land managers. They must recognize the need to manage smoke from wildland fires, using the Best Available Control Measures. Every manager must determine the level of smoke management necessary to provide the least impact on the public, both in terms of health and visibility. The effects of smoke on firefighters also must be considered when managing wildland fires. If federal agencies do not take a rational, voluntary approach to smoke management, a mandatory approach may be provided that makes it more difficult to meet resource management goals and objectives. (92)

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Prescribed burning and clean air represent two public goods seemingly at odds with each other. It is likely that optimum prescribed fire activities will be constrained by public health and visibility goals of the Clean Air Act. At this point, it seems that federal land managers may have been more responsive to air quality concerns than their counterparts have been to the



role of prescribed fire. This could be considered ironic from the perspective of two hundred years ago when smoke was likely to be encountered throughout the fire season. At the same time, with rising concerns over the global warming issue, fire in the west does need clear justification by the humans in charge of its management.

FINDINGS NO. 3 AND 5: One-time increases in fire monies will be insufficient to solve the problem and may set the federal land management agencies up for failure. A ten to fifteen-year plan with appropriate accountability and funding mechanisms is needed. Consideration should be given to establishing a revolving fire fund for a minimum of 15 years.

Fire suppression and rehabilitation funds need to be closely monitored and spent more wisely.

There are several issues here. The first concerns long-term funding. Congress has not established a revolving fund but has continued its support of fire-related funding. According to the Congressional Research Service, President Bush's budget requests have continued along the lines of the effort begun in 2000 under President Clinton. Congress has supported and added a bit to those requests.

The question of fire suppression funding is more complex and charged. For a time, the Bush Administration proposed not restoring all the funds that had been borrowed from other spending accounts for suppression activities during the 2002 fire season. This action by the Administration had the effect of paralleling the arguments of those, such as Randall O'Toole of the Thoreau Institute, who are saying that reimbursement essentially gave a "blank check" to agencies and thus an incentive to suppress fires. Although most of the money has been restored, O'Toole's arguments have some merit. Last year, the Forest Service applauded Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forest supervisors Larry Dawson and Bruce Bernhardt for their ambitious use of fire during a relatively active fire season. The two allowed natural fires to treat thousands of acres of land that would have otherwise had to have been artificially thinned or burned at a far higher cost.

FINDING NO. 6: Support for locally-based, collaborative solutions is strong, but these concepts need more definition and development.

Unfortunately, collaboration appeared compromised for a while by national political strategy and the President's "Healthy Forests Initiative." So, too, has the lack of success of so-called Stewardship Initiatives, such as

the Meadow Face project on the Nez Perce National Forest. There, loggers, sportsmen, Native Americans, and environmentalists forged an agreement that allowed extensive logging, restoration, and road-closures. The Forest Service was unable to make the funding work, and the consensus fell apart. Consensus has held together, however, for thinning projects around Idaho City on the Boise National Forest. Locally-based consensus efforts remain an important part of an overall strategy. But ultimately, the federal agencies, states, and local governments will remain accountable for the success of wildfire policy reform. With the passage of a compromise forest health bill, however, perhaps collaborative efforts will have more promise in the future.

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FINDING NO. 7: Fire policy decisions will be constrained by disagreement over the direction of forest and range policy. Decision-making methods need to be sufficiently broadly based to eliminate the need for litigation.

FINDING NO. 8: There is strong disagreement over the appropriate mix of prescribed fire, thinning, and logging as management tools. There is consensus, however, that fuel reduction should begin near at-risk communities and work outward.

Disagreement remains as illustrated by the debate over the Forest Health bill passed by Congress. The compromise legislation targets about half the new monies on fuel reduction in the wildland urban zone, our “consensus lands,” as discussed in the white paper.

We remain convinced that the consensus is still there. Larger debates and ideologies, however, make it difficult to move on that consensus. It should not surprise anyone any longer that people will use science to support pre-determined agendas. But we remain convinced that what we said earlier is true: The political consensus is to start in the interface first. There is at this point no definitive scientific evidence that would override that consensus.

“The future of wildland fire depends on the future of wildlands.”

Steven J. Pyne, Ph.D.

Stephen Pyne has pointed out that what remains in conflict is what he terms “the land between.” As he puts it:

“The future of wildland fire depends on the future of wildlands. But between the intermix landscape and those places legally reserved as wilderness or parks lies an unsettled public domain. Some reasonable agreement exists about what to do with fire at the poles of the urban and the wild; there is little regarding the land between them. Yet that is where the worst fires are flourishing, where the contest over thinning and burning is fiercest, and where the nation remains most irresolute. It is where the imperial narrative is now playing out. The Land Between will probably replace the intermix fire as fire’s next new thing.

Because Americans cannot agree on what those lands should be, they cannot craft a consensual strategy for managing fire on them.”

The new forest health legislation will test our ability to come to that consensual strategy on these lands.

There is also recent indication that some western leaders have returned to the original consensus we saw at the 2000 conference. The governors of New Mexico and Arizona, Bill Richardson and Janet Napolitano, have argued

that more attention needs to be paid to at-risk communities. They have said that at least 70% of proposed “forest health” projects should be in areas around communities and that

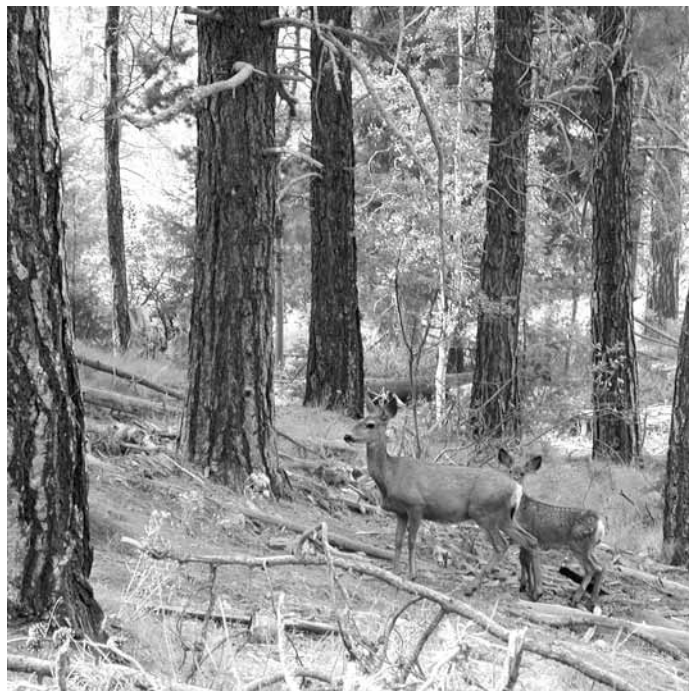
Ever since the first cavalrymen used buckets and shovels to fight fire in Yellowstone in 1886, fire control has been the foundation of land management.

the Forest Service should be prohibited from borrowing from other accounts to fund fire-fighting efforts. These are Democratic state officials talking, and thus the argument that those closer to the ground have a better sense of what should be done will be tested here.

FINDING NO. 9: Wildfire policy solutions need to be linked to other land management policies and laws where possible.

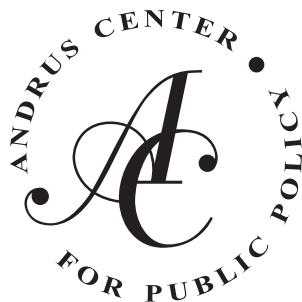
Forests and range lands are managed for a wide variety of values, and those values have shifted dramatically in the last 30 years. Industrial forestry is no longer the dominant use on national forests. Cattle-grazing, while still an important use on federal range lands, is losing its dominance to recreation and perhaps energy development. Fire policy has far too often, in the history of public lands management, been an end unto itself. Ever since the first cavalrymen used buckets and shovels to fight fire in Yellowstone in 1886, fire control has been the foundation of land management. Part of the solution is loosening the control over fire and increasing the emphasis on shifting land use to fit within the limits of the land, fires, floods, and droughts.

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