



Fuel Management Can Reduce Wildfire Risks

Position

The Inland Empire Society of American Foresters (IESAF) advocates actively managing the public and private forests of eastern Washington and northern Idaho to reduce *fire hazards* and *fire danger*. (See, beginning on page 3, the **Definitions** of italicized technical terms.) Many forests in the region have excessively high levels of *fuels* compared to historic conditions, when fire played a more prominent ecological role. The current potential for unnaturally severe and intense wildfires poses high risks to human life, property, and a variety of ecological, economic, and social values. These risks can be reduced by taking a comprehensive and active *silvicultural* approach to *fuel* management. The appropriate tools for *fuel* management are *prescribed burning* and mechanical *fuel treatment*, including *fuel* removal by *thinning* and *logging*, or timber *harvesting*.

The IESAF advocates the use of *prescribed burning* where it can be effectively and safely used to restore and maintain desired forest conditions and reduce unacceptably high risks of damage to human life and property as well as potential losses of resource values. However, due to effective fire suppression policies and programs in place since the 1930s, many forests now have accumulated too much *fuel* to use *prescribed burning* alone.

The IESAF therefore advocates a comprehensive *silvicultural* approach to *fuel* management. Desired *silvicultural* objectives are restoring vegetation density, composition, and structure to within the historic range of variability. Comprehensive *silviculture* could include the following: Trees expected to contribute substantially to desired future forest conditions are designated, and all others are removed. *Ladder fuels* and flammable surface *fuels*, including *slash*, are reduced by *prescribed burning* or mechanically removed. In many forest stands a continuing program of *prescribed burning* may be needed to keep brush and small trees from becoming *fire hazards*.



Adopted on February 12, 2001, and extended on May 19, 2006, by the Executive Committee of the Inland Empire Society of American Foresters (representing professional foresters in northern Idaho and eastern Washington state) and approved by the Forest Policy Department, Society of American Foresters, Bethesda, Maryland.

This statement will expire on May 19, 2011, unless revised or extended by the Executive Committee.

The IESAF advocates attention to economic feasibility as well as ecological soundness when managing forests in eastern Washington and northern Idaho. On national forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service, for example, ecological objectives coupled with a more robust *commercial timber sale* program can reduce, if not eliminate, the need for budget subsidies for *fuel* management. Research at western land grant universities has shown that carefully planned comprehensive *silvicultural* treatments designed to reduce *fuels* and attain other ecological objectives also can generate positive financial returns without compromising ecological objectives.

The IESAF advocates rehabilitating forests after wildfire by timely actions to reduce the risk of long-term soil damage from erosion and *reburn*. The economics of restoring burned-over forests to desired conditions can be improved with timely sale and removal of dead and dying timber.

The IESAF advocates several changes in current policies. Additional public funds beyond those currently available are needed for comprehensive *fuel* management on all forest ownerships. Air quality standards should be modified to recognize that the modest and manageable amounts of smoke from *prescribed burning* are a desirable tradeoff against the unmanageable and large quantities of smoke produced by wildfires. Public education should be part of any *fuel* management program.

Issue

Following widespread fires during the summer of 2000, policymakers recognize that *fuel* management is necessary on millions of acres throughout the Inland West, where forests were born of and maintained by fire. The potential *fire danger* posed by unnaturally severe and intense wildfires has increased, partly due to successful fire suppression policies and programs that excluded fire from its ecological role. For example, in eastern Washington the area of federal forests now subject to lethal or stand-replacing fires has doubled from what it was historically; in Idaho it has tripled. Firefighters, property, and many resource values are exposed to more wildfire risk than need be. *Fire hazards* can be reduced by *fuel treatments* aimed at restoring forests to conditions within the historic range of variability. *Prescribed fire* and *logging* are appropriate means to that end, but both are controversial. For effective and efficient *fuel treatment*, policies inhibiting active resource management need to be revised, including inadequate budgets and regulations or standards limiting the use of *prescribed burning* and *logging* in areas where *fuel* levels pose unacceptably high risks from severe and intense wildfires.

Recommendation

The IESAF recommends and supports a long-term strategy on all forest ownerships to reduce risks associated with wildfire through a comprehensive *silvicultural* approach to *fuel* management, using *prescribed burning* and mechanical *fuel treatments*, including *thinning*, *logging*, and *commercial timber sales*. These management actions would improve *forest health* by increasing our forests' resistance to not only fire, but also insects and diseases. The recipe for successful forest management, including *fuel treatment*, is to give resource managers the appropriate tools, the flexibility to use those tools, access to the land needing treatment, and continuous funding.

Members of the IESAF can assist non-industrial landowners with planning and implementing a program of comprehensive *silviculture*, including *fuel treatments*. A high priority for action is in the wildland-urban interface near and within cities and towns. Wildlands are also a priority where *fuels* pose *fire hazards* and unacceptable risks of *fire danger* to firefighters and resource values. Several million acres of such areas are on public lands in the region.

Definitions

The following definitions are derived from *The Dictionary of Forestry*, published by the Society of American Foresters in 1998:

- *Commercial timber sale* – producing timber for sale to a business enterprise.
- *Fire danger* – the sum of constant danger and variable danger factors affecting the inception, spread, resistance to control, and subsequent fire damage.
- *Fire hazard* – the ease of ignition and resistance to control of the *fuel* complex.
- *Forest health* – the perceived condition of a forest derived from concerns about such factors as its age, structure, composition, function, vigor, presence of unusual levels of insects or disease, and resilience to disturbance.
- *Fuel* – combustible material in standing vegetation or on the forest floor.
- *Fuel treatment* – any manipulation or removal of *fuels* to reduce the likelihood of ignition or to lessen potential damage and resistance to control.
- *Harvesting* – see *logging*.
- *Ladder fuels* – combustible material that provides vertical continuity between vegetation strata and allows fire to climb into the crowns of trees or shrubs with relative ease, which can help initiate and ensure the continuation of a crown fire.
- *Logging* – the felling, skidding, on-site processing, and loading of trees onto trucks (a

synonym for *harvesting*). This includes sawtimber-sized material (“sawlogs” that are manufactured into lumber) and smaller-sized pulpwood or wood fiber harvested for energy.

- *Prescribed burn* – to deliberately burn wildland *fuels* in either their natural or modified state and under specified environmental conditions, which allows the fire to be confined to a predetermined area and produces the fireline intensity and rate of spread required to attain planned resource management objectives.
- *Reburn* – the repeat burning of an area over which a fire has previously passed but has left unburnt *fuel*.
- *Silviculture* – the art and science of controlling the establishment, growth, composition, health (see *forest health*), and quality of forests and woodlands to meet the diverse needs and values of landowners and society on a sustainable basis.
- *Slash* – the residue, i.e. treetops or branches, left on the ground after *logging* or accumulating as a result of a storm, fire, or other activity.
- *Thinning* – a *silvicultural* treatment made to reduce stand density of trees primarily to improve growth, enhance *forest health*, or recover potential mortality.

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Society of American Foresters, with about 15,000 members, is the national organization that represents all segments of the forestry profession in the United States. It includes public and private practitioners, researchers, administrators, educators, and forestry students. The Society was established in 1900 by Gifford Pinchot and six other pioneer foresters.

The mission of the Society of American Foresters is to advance the science, education, technology, and practice of forestry; to enhance the competency of its members; to establish professional excellence; and to use the knowledge, skills, and conservation ethic of the profession to ensure the continued health and use of forest ecosystems and the present and future availability of forest resources to benefit society.

The Society is the accreditation authority for professional forestry education in the United States. The Society publishes the *Journal of Forestry*; the quarterlies, *Forest Science*, *Southern Journal of Applied Forestry*, *Northern Journal of Applied Forestry*, and *Western Journal of Applied Forestry*; *The Forestry Source* and the annual *Proceedings* of the Society of American Foresters national convention.

