



FACT SHEET



United States Department of Agriculture
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The Healthy Forests Initiative Record Resources Available to Fight and Prevent Wildfires New Administrative Tools Available Congressional Action Needed

Threat from Catastrophic Fires Continues

Our nation's forests and rangelands are at risk. An estimated 190 million acres of federal forests and rangelands in the United States, an area twice the size of California, face high risk of catastrophic fire. Decades of an accumulation of dense undergrowth and brush, along with drought conditions, insect infestation and disease and invasion by exotic species make forests and rangelands in many areas throughout the country vulnerable to environmentally destructive wildfires. Many ponderosa pine forests are 15 times denser than they were a century ago. Where 25 to 35 trees once grew on each acre of forest, now more than 500 trees are crowded together in unhealthy conditions.

In 2000, the United States suffered its worst wildland fire season in 50 years. Last year's fire season - among the worst in four decades - saw 88,458 fires burn 7.2 million acres, destroy more than 842 structures, and take the lives of 23 firefighters. Four states - New Mexico, Oregon, Colorado, and Arizona - registered their worst fires in modern history in 2002.

In 2003 large fires have appeared later in the year than in 2002. As of August 21, more than 42,500 wildland fires have burned more than 2.4 million acres. Despite the late start, the impacts have been as dramatic as 2000 and 2002. More than \$550 million have been spent on suppression efforts to date. Sixteen firefighters have lost their lives. The 84,750 acre Aspen Fire in Arizona burned through the community of Summerhaven destroying 333 homes and structures.

Fire danger levels across much of the western United States is expected to remain high to extreme throughout the summer and early fall. Drought, extensive tree mortality due to insect infestations and invasive plant species such as cheat grass has elevated the wildland fire risk.

The Administration is responding to this challenge by proposing record levels of funding for firefighting (up 55 percent from 2000), hiring additional fire fighters, purchasing additional equipment, accomplishing record levels of forest restoration (this year's projected 2.6 million acres will more than double the treatment acreage in 2000) and by advancing its Healthy Forests Initiative, including five administrative reforms and proposed legislation.

Major Improvements to the Wildland Fire Program

Since taking office, the Bush Administration has implemented major reforms to the wildland fire program while continuing to ensure compliance with environmental laws. In May of 2002, it reached agreement with the Western Governors' Association, state and local officials, and tribes on a 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan for reducing wildland fire risks to people, communities and the environment. This historic plan established a framework for protecting communities and the environment through collaboration on thinning, planned burns and restoration projects.

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The 10-Year Plan is based on more than 90 years of experience and fire research showing that reducing hazardous fuels (underbrush, deadwood and over-crowded trees) near homes and structures and in strategic places across the landscape can significantly change wildfire behavior to reduce damage to communities and the environment.

Research confirms that reducing hazardous fuels further away from communities is just as important as placing treatments in and around homes and structures. Fast moving catastrophic wildfires that start far from communities in overly dense forests -- like the historic Rodeo-Chediski Fire that burned in Arizona in 2002 -- can quickly threaten or destroy homes and other buildings, and often leave behind a charred landscape, ash-laden rivers and lakes, spoiled habitat for threatened and endangered species, and sterile soils. Under the 10-Year Plan, Federal land management agencies are working with states and communities in an unprecedented effort to ensure that both communities and the forest and rangelands surrounding them are better protected from destructive wildfires.

The Bush Administration has established a Wildland Fire Leadership Council including representatives of federal, state, and local officials, and tribal interests to coordinate wildland fire management policies under the 10-Year Plan and to monitor accomplishment. This vital Council brings together senior officials to coordinate efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire and improve the health of our forests, woodlands, and rangelands.

Since April 2002, the Council has:

- Ä Reviewed and approved federal fuels treatment programs for fiscal years 2003 and 2004 for more than 5 million acres at a cost of more than \$825 million;
- Ä Agreed on realignment of budget structures within the two departments to consistently track expenditures across agency lines;
- Ä Developed a plan to reduce wildland fire suppression costs;
- Ä Required collaboration with state and local officials on all fuels treatment projects;
- Ä Developed common performance measures;
- Ä Developed an automated reporting system for federal agencies to track and measure performance; and
- Ä Completed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Departments of Agriculture, Energy and the Interior to support the economic use of biomass from fuels treatments and post-fire environmental restoration projects.

More Resources Available to Prevent and Fight Fires

The Bush Administration has worked on a bi-partisan basis to increase the resources available for fire fighting and fire preventive fuels treatment work. As a result, federal dollars available in 2003 to fight fires have increased 55 percent since 2000.

Program	2000	2003	2004
Wildland Fire Preparedness	\$547,617*	\$887,408	\$892,472
Fire Suppression Operations	197,256	577,273	799,890
Other Operations:			
Hazardous Fuel Reduction	117,040	412,253	417,582
Rehabilitation and Restoration	20,000	26,948	24,500
Fire Facilities	0	1,838	0
Research and Development	0	21,288	21,427
Joint Fire Sciences	0	7,948	8,000
Forest Health Management	0	16,824	11,934
Economic Action Program	0	4,967	0
Community and Private Assistance	0	0	0
State Fire Assistance	23,929	71,738	71,840
Volunteer /Rural Fire Assistance	3,240	23,128	23,283
Emergency Suppression Contingency	390,000	0	0
TOTAL, DOI and USDA	\$1,326,088	\$2,051,613	\$2,270,928

* Dollars are in the thousands. FY 2000 and 2003 are enacted levels; FY 2004 is the President's request.

More firefighting resources are also available. There are more firefighters, helicopters, airtankers, and heavy equipment to fight fires. This has allowed firefighters to do an outstanding job of fire fighting, controlling over 99 percent of wildfires on initial attack in 2002 and 2003.

Resource	FY 2000	FY 2003
Firefighters	12,131	15,330
Type I crews	68	90
Engines (all types)	2,197	2,581
Dozers/plows/tenders	286	335
Airtankers	64	72
Helicopters	119	151

This year, firefighting crews and equipment are pre-positioned as needed in states to provide effective initial wildfire attack. Additional helicopters and single engine airtankers are providing equivalent protection due to the reduced availability of large, multi-engine air tankers that have been grounded for safety reasons.

Record Amounts of Hazardous Fuels Treatment Work Accomplished

The long-term solution to catastrophic wildfires is to address their causes by restoring fire to fire-adapted ecosystems through reduction of hazardous fuels and returning our forests and rangelands to healthier conditions while ensuring compliance with NEPA and other environmental laws. Tree thinning and removal of dense underbrush can ensure thriving forests while reducing risks of catastrophic fires and the dangers they pose to firefighters, communities and the environment.

The Administration is meeting the challenge. Last year, Federal land management agencies treated a record 2.25 million acres, an increase of a million acres over FY 2000 levels. This year the agencies have already broken that record, treating 2.3 million acres to date, and expecting to treat a total of 2.6 million acres. The wildland-urban interface and public and private lands adjacent to communities at risk are a top priority - it is here where we invest nearly 65 per cent of our forest restoration dollars. Still, there is much more work to be done - tens of millions of acres need treatment.

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The President's Healthy Forests Initiative Being Implemented

While increased and sustained funding is critical to reducing catastrophic wildfires and improving forest health, the Bush Administration is also acting to ensure that these investments are producing more timely decisions, greater efficiency and better results on the ground. Under the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Administration has completed or proposed several administrative reforms, including:

1. Establishing new procedures provided for under the National Environmental Policy Act to allow priority fuel treatment (thinning and prescribed fire) and forest restoration (reseeding and planting) projects, identified through collaboration with state, local and tribal governments and interested persons, to proceed quickly without the need for lengthy environmental documentation. These procedures are based on peer-reviewed science and a review of over 2,600 similar projects where environmental analyses showed that no significant environmental impact occurred.
2. Improving the agencies' administrative appeal rules to expedite appeals of forest health projects and encourage early and more meaningful public participation. These improvements reduce complex procedures, provide more timely decisions and provide great flexibility in emergency situations.
3. Providing guidance to Federal agencies to make consultations under the Endangered Species Act more timely while emphasizing long-term benefits to threatened and endangered species, and proposing new regulations under the Endangered Species Act (Section 7) to expedite consultation for forest health projects that are unlikely to harm threatened or endangered species or their habitat.
4. Providing guidance from the Council on Environmental Quality to improve environmental assessments for priority forest health projects. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are implementing this guidance by preparing assessments for fifteen pilot fuels treatment projects. These assessments will serve as templates for future work and are expected to be completed this summer.

On the legislative front, Congress enacted legislation proposed by the Bush Administration expanding stewardship contracting authority, which allows Federal agencies to enter into long-term (up to 10 years) contracts with small businesses, communities and nonprofit organizations to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health. Stewardship contracts focus on desirable end results on the ground that improve forest health and provide benefits to communities.

The new authority allows contractors to keep wood products in exchange for the service of thinning trees and the removal of brush and dead wood to prevent catastrophic wildfire while improving environmental conditions and adhering to applicable environmental regulations. Long-term contracts foster a public/private partnership to restore forest and rangeland health by giving contractors the incentive to invest in equipment and facilities needed to productively use material from forest thinning to make useful wood products or to produce biomass energy, all at tremendous savings to taxpayers.

Sixty-eight stewardship contracts are projected to be approved this year up from last year's total of 26. Substantially more stewardship contracts are expected to be approved in FY 2004.

Congress Should Complete Action on Healthy Forests Legislation

The Administration strongly supports the bipartisan bill. The House of Representatives passed H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act that is based on legislation proposed by the Administration. This bill would provide critical new tools called for under the Healthy Forests Initiative to more effectively reduce wildfire risks and improve forest health.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act establishes procedures to expedite forest and rangeland restoration projects on Forest Service and BLM lands. It focuses on lands (1) near communities in the wildland urban interface, (2) in high risk municipal watersheds, (3) that provide important habitat for threatened and endangered species where catastrophic wildfire threatens the survival of the species, and (4) where insects or disease are destroying the forest and increasing the threat of catastrophic wildfire. It also provides more timely judicial review of forest health projects and ensures that courts consider both short and long-term effects of such projects before issuing injunctions to stop them. Additionally, the bill would:

1. Help communities more effectively use wood, brush and other plant materials removed in forest health projects as a fuel supply for biomass energy;
2. Authorize a program to support community-based watershed forestry partnerships that address critical forest stewardship, watershed protection and restoration needs at the state and local level;
3. Direct additional research focused on the early detection and containment of insect and disease infestations; and
4. Establish a private forestland easement program focused on recovering forest ecosystem types and protecting valuable wildlife habitat.

The Administration commends the House of Representatives for passing this bill with strong bipartisan support and the Senate Agriculture Committee for unanimously passing the bill out of committee. The Administration strongly encourages the Senate to quickly complete action on this important legislation.

For more information on the Healthy Forests Initiative, visit <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/hfi/> or <http://www.doi.gov/hfi/newhfi/>

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