

FACT SHEET



United States
Department
of Agriculture



White House
Council on
Environmental
Quality



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of Interior

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Administrative Actions to Implement the President's Healthy Forests Initiative December 11, 2002

Background

America's forests and rangelands are suffering a crisis of deteriorating ecological health caused by a century of well-intentioned but misguided management that interrupted the natural fire cycle and allowed forests to grow unnaturally dense. This has left forests vulnerable to disease, drought and extraordinarily destructive wildfires.

Wildfires burned over 7.1 million acres of public and private lands last summer, an area larger than the states of Maryland and Rhode Island combined. This affected hundreds of communities across the country, as 21 firefighters were killed battling these fires, tens of thousands of people were evacuated from their homes and thousands of structures were destroyed. Unnaturally extreme fires are just one consequence of the deteriorating forest and rangeland health that now affects more than 190 million acres of public land, an area twice the size of California. An unprecedented epidemic of insects and forest disease is also ravaging many forests, particularly in southeastern forests such as the Oconee National Forest in Georgia and the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee. Some of the worst pine beetle epidemics on record are killing tens of thousands of acres of trees in southern and western forests.

Vital Forest Health Restoration Work is Hampered by Excessive Red Tape

While federal, state and local land managers have attempted to restore forest health and prevent these catastrophic wildfires and beetle infestations, their efforts have been severely hampered by unnecessary and costly procedural delays that have prevented them from acting in a timely manner to protect communities and avert ecological crises.

Excessive analysis, ineffective public involvement and management inefficiencies trap land managers in costly procedural quagmires, where a single project can take years to move forward and where planning costs alone can exceed \$1 million. Even routine forest health projects often proceed very slowly. In the meantime, communities, wildlife habitat and forests suffer. Fires and insect infestations that begin on public lands often spread to private lands as well, causing significant property damage.

For example, in 1995 a severe winter storm left nearly 35,000 acres of wind-damaged trees on the Six Rivers National Forest in California. The storm's effects created hazardous conditions susceptible to catastrophic wildfires, with fuel loading 10 times manageable levels. Planning work began to address these conditions, but only 1,600 acres were treated before fires burned the 35,000 storm-damaged acres and another 90,000 adjacent acres in 1999. It cost \$70 million to contain these fires. After the fire, the Forest Service was required to start its analysis again, since post-fire land conditions had changed. Seven years after the storm, the project remains tied up in procedural appeals and the hazardous ecological conditions remain unaddressed.

Federal land management procedures should not be so complex that they prevent timely action to address ecological crises on public lands. Forest Service officials have estimated

that planning and assessment consume 40 percent of their time at the national forest level, costing more than \$250 million per year. Although much of this work is important, officials estimate that improving administrative procedures may allow agencies to redirect up to \$100 million a year from unnecessary planning to actual forest health restoration work that will improve ecosystems and protect local communities from catastrophic wildfires.

The Healthy Forests Initiative

Recognizing this crisis of forest and rangeland health, President Bush proposed the Healthy Forests Initiative in August 2002, and directed federal agencies to develop several administrative and legislative tools to restore these ecosystems to healthy, natural conditions and assist in executing core components of the National Fire Plan. These tools will also move forward the Implementation Plan for the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy, a historic document that was developed this spring through an unprecedented collaboration among federal agencies, western and southern governors, state foresters, tribal officials, industry and environmental groups.

The Healthy Forests Initiative will provide land managers with the ability to effectively reduce the accumulation of hazardous fuels and restore wildfire-damaged areas. The initiative will enable managers to administer public supported projects in a more effective and timely manner.

Since the President's actions in August, federal agencies have taken several steps to implement components of the Healthy Forests Initiative. Additional administrative steps are being taken today. Congressional authorization will also be needed to implement other key components of the initiative.

Actions to Date

Restoring fire-damaged public lands: Much work has been done this year to restore landscapes damaged by wildland fire. For example, in 2002, 890 rehabilitation and restoration projects were accomplished in 22 states using National Fire Plan funding. An additional 130 burned area rehabilitation projects were completed with emergency suppression funding totaling \$70 million on National Forest lands. Comprehensive restoration plans are also in place, or near completion, for the unprecedented fires that burned millions of acres in Arizona, Colorado and Oregon. These projects prevent significant damage to habitats, watersheds and drinking water supplies and provide for the economic and ecological stability of many rural communities that rely on the forest for employment and recreation.

Community Partnerships: In April, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) was created to coordinate and implement the National Fire Plan and the Federal Wildland Fire Policy, both of which in part aim to reduce the risks of severe wildfire to communities. The WFLC is moving aggressively on implementation of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan. For example, the WFLC has supported the USDA Forest Service and Department of the Interior in defining a collaborative process for fuels project selection and project development. This process will expand to include the National Association of State Foresters, the National Association of Counties and the Intertribal Timber Council.

Legislative Proposal: In September, the Administration submitted legislation to Congress to implement key aspects of the Healthy Forests Initiative. The intent of this bipartisan legislation is to significantly advance common sense forest health efforts that prevent the damage caused by catastrophic wildfires by:

- Allowing for more timely treatment of forests at risk of catastrophic fire, which pose the greatest risk to people, communities and the environment.
- Permitting agencies to enter into long-term stewardship contracts with communities, non-profit organizations or the private sector. These stewardship contracts allow the organization carrying out forest health restoration work to use forest products (small-diameter trees and brush removed during thinning projects) in partial compensation for their work.
- Simplifying procedural requirements for the Forest Service so that the agency can respond quickly to rehabilitating or restoring areas damaged by wildland fires.
- Directing the courts to compare the short-term impacts of fire prevention projects with public interest in avoiding long-term harm to ecosystems.

The Administration has also made progress in developing several tools to assist land management agencies in restoring forest health and addressing the objectives of the Healthy Forests Initiative.

Administrative Actions to Implement the Healthy Forests Initiative

The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are proposing today several administrative actions to improve regulatory processes, ensure more timely decisions and provide greater efficiencies and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires while improving forest and rangeland health. These actions include:

1. Facilitate Reviews of Forest Health Restoration and Rehabilitation Projects. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior are proposing to identify high priority forest health projects and move forward quickly with this important work. Critical environmental stabilization and rehabilitation projects in the aftermath of wildfires will also be expedited. This work will be conducted under the authority of two new “categorical exclusions,” a determination that such projects do not result in significant impacts, eliminating the need for individual analyses and lengthier documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act. These categorical exclusions will allow federal land managers to authorize forest health (thinning) and rehabilitation and stabilization projects such as reseeding and planting without unnecessary environmental analysis.

The hazardous fuels reduction categorical exclusion will only apply to projects identified in a manner consistent with the collaborative framework in the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan adopted by federal agencies and state, local and tribal governments this spring.

These hazardous fuels reduction activities would not: (1) be conducted in wilderness areas (or where they would impair the suitability of wilderness study areas for preservation as wilderness); (2) include the use of herbicides or pesticides; (3) involve the construction of new permanent roads or other infrastructure; (4) include timber sales that do not have hazardous fuels reduction as their primary purpose.

Activities carried out under the rehabilitation and stabilization categorical exclusion would only take place after a wildfire. These activities cannot use herbicides or pesticides, nor include the construction of new permanent roads or other infrastructure.

Activities conducted under both proposed categorical exclusions must be consistent with agency procedures and land and resource management plans. For example, procedures and plans call for appropriate buffers from riparian areas and areas containing cultural or historical artifacts. Projects must meet all applicable federal, state and tribal laws and other requirements imposed for protection of the environment. The agencies must also continue to conduct appropriate consultations with federal and state regulatory agencies. For example, activities categorically excluded must still be evaluated to assess effects on threatened and endangered species, and undergo any necessary consultation with either the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service. These proposed categorical exclusions will not be used for activities where there are extraordinary circumstances, such as adverse effects on threatened and endangered species or their critical habitats, wilderness areas, inventoried roadless areas, wetlands and archeological or historical sites.

2. Amend Rules for Project Appeals to Hasten Process of Reviewing Vital Forest Health Projects: Agriculture and Interior will propose steps to expedite appeals of forest health projects while encouraging meaningful public participation.
3. Improve Endangered Species Act Process to Expedite Decisions. The Departments of Interior and Commerce will improve the process for reviewing fuels treatment projects under the Endangered Species Act. This will facilitate the timely completion of fuels treatment projects while providing protection for wildlife and restoring habitat.
4. Establish Improved and More-Focused Process for Environmental Assessments of forest health projects and conduct at least 10 pilot projects to establish the effectiveness of these expedited procedures.

The proposed procedures to facilitate review of forest health restoration and rehabilitation projects, and the proposed rules for project appeals will be published in the Federal Register for public notice and comment.

All these actions will make it easier for land managers to restore forest and rangeland health, while also engaging communities early, frequently and in a meaningful way in these decisions. These changes will bring about more timely actions to restore forest and rangeland health.

Next Steps

The Administration will continue to work with Congress, state, local and tribal officials and the public to advance additional common-sense efforts to protect communities and people and restore forest and rangeland health. The Administration is committed to building upon these efforts to improve the regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires and forest diseases. If implemented, these proposed tools will assist land managers in restoring forest health and the social, economic, and ecological harmony in communities.

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