

**U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE
NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM
WILDLAND FIRE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN 2003-2010**

Vision

All U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) lands are maintained in desired ecological conditions. Fire management activities contribute by suppressing unwanted wildland fires, allowing naturally ignited fires to burn when appropriate, implementing fire treatments that approximate the natural, ecological role of fire, and implementing other fuels treatments that conserve Service trust resources to the greatest extent possible without compromising firefighter and public safety. Threats to communities from wildland fire are mitigated to socially and ecologically acceptable levels. The need for emergency stabilization and rehabilitation is minimal. Fire programs, resources, and personnel are integrated into Service and Refuge programs seamlessly. The best available science, as developed through research and monitoring, is applied to management practices. Full interagency partnerships are maintained.

Executive Summary

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The Service has long recognized fire as a unique process that shapes wildlife habitat structure and function, and has managed and used fire extensively. Fire is essential to management of many of the over 500 National Wildlife Refuges and National Fish Hatcheries. Guiding principles of fire management in the Service include responsible stewardship, habitat management strategies that are based upon conserving ecological integrity, and establishing effective partnerships.

There are many landscape-related challenges to managing wildland fire effectively on Service lands. These include controlling relatively more units (Refuges) than most other Federal fire partners, and the complexity of contributing to fire programs of units outside Refuges, such as Federal fish hatcheries. The Service also provides fire assistance to States, Tribes, private and Federal agencies for endangered species and migratory bird management, and assists with habitat management on non-Service lands. As a result, the Service fire program is responsible for managing fire on many privately-owned lands. Further, because the Refuge System includes a relatively large number of small, fragmented tracts embedded in urban areas, and because private lands adjacent to undeveloped Service land is attractive to developers, the proportion of Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) is high relative to holdings. Continued urban expansion and development, particularly in wetland management districts, increases invasive species vectors, often affecting fuel loads. At the far end of the spectrum, wild Refuge lands in Alaska are managed to ensure availability of subsistence resources for local populations, so there is a keen interest in resource management activities potentially involving wildland fire.

Within the fire program itself, challenges include restoring fire-suppressed landscapes to historic fuel loads and vegetative composition, maintaining treatment schedules in areas already restored to good ecological conditions, dealing with invasive species that change the condition class, and practicing adaptive habitat management with a small staff available to monitor the ecological effects of fuels treatments.

Goals and strategies in this plan are consistent with Department and Service policies, National Fire Plan direction, the President's Healthy Forest Initiative, the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan, National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Guidelines, initiatives of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, and Interagency Standards for Fire and Aviation Operations. This document identifies goals, strategies, and actions to reach five mission goals. Three goals have been incorporated from the National Fire Plan; the others, from a Refuge System initiative, Fulfilling the Promise, which identifies visions for wildlife, habitat, people, and leadership. This plan should be reviewed and updated annually, to provide direction for the Service fire program.

Goal A: Improve Fire Prevention & Suppression

The Service annually prepares for preventing, detecting, and taking prompt, effective initial action on wildland fires. To do this, we hire and train qualified firefighters, purchase and maintain supplies and equipment, and contract for services. We assist other Federal agencies, State and Tribal governments, and local partners in training, suppression, and interagency incident and dispatch support activities.

Long-term objectives:

- ***Eliminate loss of life, and reduce firefighter injuries and damage to communities and the environment from severe, unplanned, and unwanted wildland fires.***
- ***Improve Federal, State and local firefighting resources capability and readiness to protect communities and the environment from wildland fires.***
- ***Reduce large fire suppression costs.***

Strategy 1: Improve wildland fire prevention/education capability.

Action: Develop a staffing analysis for reducing human-caused fires.

Strategy 2: Maintain or enhance readiness staffing and resources to achieve 95 percent initial attack success.

Action: Conduct more fire readiness reviews.

Action: Identify needs to improve safety on Type 3, 4, and 5 incidents.

Action: Encourage participation of all Service personnel in fire qualifications program.

Strategy 3: Improve fire facilities and fire equipment programs.

Action: Organize a Service fire equipment group to deal with issues.

Action: Inventory existing facilities, identify needs, and develop options.

Strategy 4: Improve on-incident leadership.

Action: Increase numbers of qualified Type 4 incident commanders.

Strategy 5: Increase Service participation in extended attack and large fire operations.

Action: Increase the numbers of non-fire employees involved in incident management.

Strategy 6: Enhance local capabilities to develop quality Wildland Fire Situation Analyses (WFSA).

Action: Provide training, education opportunities, and incident support to line officers.

Action: Develop pre-attack plans as appropriate for critical areas.

Goal B: Reduce Hazardous Fuels, and Restore, Rehabilitate, and Maintain Fire-Adapted Ecosystems

The Service actively manages fuels on selected Service lands. Treatments are designed, in collaboration with local partners, to cost-effectively reduce risks from unwanted fires to communities and habitats, while remaining consistent with refuge management objectives. The Service has long recognized the many ecological benefits of fire in restoring, maintaining, and enhancing Refuge lands. This is reflected in the expansion of prescribed fire use over the past 75 years. Keeping this capability is critical to the Service mission, because most Service lands are fire-adapted ecosystems.

Fuels funds target the highest priority fuels management needs. The Service has demonstrated success in meeting National Fire Plan treatment targets; however, these accomplishments are not meeting the full extent of the needs identified within the Service. Because of altered fire regimes and increases in WUI areas, mechanical means to reduce fuels and alter vegetation structure may be needed before fire application, especially near communities. Prescribed fire treatments and/or wildland fire use are often indicated as tools to manage for wildlife habitat.

Long-term objectives:

- ***Treat hazardous fuels, using appropriate tools, to reduce the risk of unplanned and unwanted wildland fire to communities and to the environment.***
- ***Restore, rehabilitate, and maintain fire-adapted ecosystems, using appropriate tools, in a manner that provides sustainable environmental, social, and economic benefits, to conditions that meet the goals of refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans and Habitat Management Plans.***
- ***Complete and amend all fire management plans to comply with Federal Wildland Fire Policy.***

Strategy 7: Assess risk to communities and resources from wildland fires originating on Service lands.

Action: Identify treatment needs based upon risks.

Action: Improve fuels mapping capability in coordination with Service and Interagency teams.

Action: Expand collaboration with partners and the public in WUI areas.

Action: Identify rare, declining, or unique communities dependent on specific fire regimes.

Action: Develop risk mitigation plans for communities in collaboration with partners and the public.

Strategy 8: Implement cost-effective mitigation treatments compatible with Refuge goals and objectives.

Action: Use contractors for treatments as appropriate for the treatment and the risk.

Strategy 9: Build and maintain an infrastructure to support the Service fuels management program.

Action: Develop a human capital plan with positions and competencies identified.

Action: Share resources where feasible (both personnel and equipment).

Action: Increase awareness among line officers of the National Fire Plan and the Service role in its implementation.

- Strategy 10: Implement wildland fire use where safe and practicable.
 Action: Update Fire Management Plans (FMPs) prior to implementing wildland fire use projects.
 Action: Coordinate with, and participate in, resource management planning efforts.
 Action: Increase training and use of Fire Use Managers and Long Term Fire Behavior Analysts.
 Action: Enhance local capability to develop quality Wildland Fire Implementation Plans (WFIP).
- Strategy 11: Monitor treatments to provide feedback for adaptive management.
 Action: Assess Service-wide fuels treatment monitoring program needs and funding.
- Strategy 12: Secure funds to plan and implement projects on all Service-managed lands.
 Action: Increase cost-shares with habitat management or other non-fire funds.
 Action: Increase funding from non-profits and partners.
 Action: Keep key officials informed of Service fuels program accomplishments and capacities.
- Strategy 13: Develop and implement collaborative means to identify and prioritize project areas.
 Action: Identify by fire regime and condition class, high priority habitat needing fuel treatments.
 Action: Catalog condition class and needed return intervals in FMPs.
 Action: Work with partners to identify high priority projects across agency boundaries.
- Strategy 14: Conduct Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation (ESR) activities needed in burned areas.
 Action: Monitor effectiveness of ESR treatments.
 Action: Provide guidance for Refuges to implement cost-effective ESR programs.
- Strategy 15: Improve fire management planning.
 Action: Identify standards for adequate, representative environmental data for fire planning.
 Action: Improve fire occurrence and weather data collection to interagency standards.
 Action: Train staff to implement standards for fire occurrence and weather data collection.
 Action: Increase knowledge of the National Environmental Policy Act among fire planners.
 Action: Tier Fire Management Plans to Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plans (CCP).
 Action: Standardize collection of historic fire and fuels treatment data in GIS.
 Action: Develop specific, measurable prescribed fire objectives in annual habitat work plans.

Goal C: Promote Community Assistance

The Service supports a broad range of collaborative community assistance programs under the National Fire Plan. Key elements include the Rural Fire Assistance program, community risk assessments, fuel treatment project development and implementation, and information and education outreach efforts to increase community awareness and knowledge of wildland fire and to enhance local interface protection initiatives.

The Service has working agreements with hundreds of rural fire departments. Many Service units are small, isolated parcels, with no dedicated wildland fire personnel. Support of neighboring rural and volunteer fire departments is critical to initial incident response. Rural Fire Assistance grants help them obtain safety equipment and participate in prevention activities and wildland fire training. Awards are coordinated with States and partners. Community assistance includes support for collaborative local wildland fire assessments and plans for communities at risk. The Service also supports community education and outreach to increase awareness of defensible space planning and of fire-adapted ecosystems.

Long-term objectives:

- ***Increase capability of communities at risk to prevent losses from wildland fire and the potential to seek economic opportunities resulting from treatments and services.***
- ***Support biomass utilization and sustainable small business development where possible.***

Strategy 16: Improve relationships with Rural/Volunteer Fire Departments.
Action: Assist in developing coordinated fire response plans at local levels, as appropriate.

Strategy 17: Expand outreach to homeowners and communities about fire prevention and mitigation.
Action: Encourage Service participation and collaboration in community fire prevention education activities and community wildland fire mitigation plans.

Strategy 18: Promote local fuels treatment contracting capability.
Action: Encourage use of Assistance Agreements as a first step toward local contracting competence.

Strategy 19: Increase Rural Fire Assistance funding capability to 40 percent of grant requests.
Action: Pursue budget initiatives to increase Rural Fire Assistance program.

Goal D: Improve Human Capital and Work Force Management

Budget limitations demand the most efficient and effective organization. These strategies complement on-going Service and Departmental efforts. The Service fire program will actively participate in developmental programs, which emphasize fire management leadership and operational skills. The Incident Command System is one of the strengths of the fire management program. The Service supports use of this capability for non-fire incidents, including disaster relief and homeland security operations; however, the potential impacts on the workforce and the resource suggest the need for a comprehensive strategy for all-risk management.

Long-term objective:

- ***Implement a wildland fire management program that meets the highest standards of professional capability and technical expertise.***

Strategy 20: Develop and implement a human capital plan in concert with the Department human capital plan.
Action: Increase recruitment for key positions to expand applicant pools.
Action: Continue support of the Technical Fire Management Program.
Action: Continue the formal National Mentoring program, and expand mentoring at regional and local levels.

Action: Train and develop to assure staff meet interagency standards and competencies.

Action: Implement standard Department position descriptions as they are approved.

Action: Plan employee development for fire teams and incident support.

Action: Increase participation in incident emergency response of all fire-qualified Service staff.

Action: Develop and foster fire management expertise among staff with collateral duties.

Strategy 21: Incorporate fire management experience into rating plans for senior resource managers.

Action: Improve fire management decision-making for agency and fire managers.

Action: Identify fire management knowledge and skill areas needed by line officers.

Action: Increase participation by key refuge managers and project leaders at the national training program "Fire Line Leadership for Resource Managers."

Goal E: Improve Awareness and Outreach.

Promote the image of the Service as the experienced technical expert in the cost-effective and science-based use and management of wildland fire to restore and maintain healthy ecosystems, serving the interests of both wildlife and people.

Long-term objectives:

- ***Congress, DOI, OMB, NGOs, community partners, and Service employees understand the role of fire in refuge and ecosystem management, and support informed decisions about its use.***
- ***Improved in-depth public understanding of natural fire processes and use of prescribed fire, including ecological benefits and risks.***

Strategy 22: Develop a national communications plan for wildland fire management.

Action: Educate internal Service staff and leverage existing outreach capabilities and channels to reach existing Service audiences.

Action: Develop and deliver key messages about fire's role in managing wildlife habitat.

Action: Direct contact with Congress, OMB, and OWFC to relay successes and needs.

Action: Nurture state, NGO, and community partnerships to clarify program needs and benefits, and build support from the State and private sectors.

Action: Use external communication vehicles (website, media contact, etc.) to reinforce messages to all target audiences.

Action: Coordinate with other Federal agency partners to incorporate Service messages into interagency fire management outreach.