



THE  
WILDERNESS  
SOCIETY

# FACTS

## Expanding Wildland Fire Use (WFU)

Wildland Fire Use (WFU) is the practice of actively managing naturally-ignited fires in designated sections of forests to accomplish resource management goals. WFU is widely accepted by scientists, policymakers and land managers as an important tool not only to help mitigate the escalating costs of fire suppression, but also to help restore forests and make them more resilient.

The default response to most fires, even those burning in remote areas, has been to fight them; contributing to \$1 billion in suppression costs in four of the last seven fire seasons. The resulting absence of fire has also resulted in unnatural levels of dense vegetation, resulting in more intense fires that require more aggressive attack.



Lick Creek WFU event  
Photo Courtesy: John McCarthy, The Wilderness Society, Boise

### What is WFU?

A highly managed process, carried out by specially trained personnel, based on decades of management experience, WFU is not a “let burn” fire.

- Fire managers must go through a rigorous decision-making process to undertake a WFU event, including evaluating potential threats to life, property or resources that cannot be mitigated. If such a threat exists, the fire must be suppressed.
- Fire managers also assess weather conditions, personnel availability and other variables, and once the initial decision is made, managers constantly monitor and reassess conditions to ensure that WFU continues to be the appropriate response.
- A Fire Management Plan (FMP) must authorize the use of WFU.

### Why WFU?

Wildland Fire Use is important from both an economic and an ecological perspective.

- WFU can help prevent fuel build-up over large areas, reducing the need for expensive fuel treatments in the future.
- WFU helps reduce the likelihood of unnaturally large fires that are expensive to suppress.
- WFU enhances wildlife habitat and increases soil productivity.

- WFU creates improved conditions for surviving old growth trees and helps regenerate fire-dependent tree species.

## Expanding WFU

Both the 1995 Federal Fire Policy and its 2001 Update recognized the importance of fire as an essential ecosystem process and the necessity of returning fire to the landscape, where safe and appropriate. A recent USDA Inspector General report also recommended that the Forest Service increase WFU. **Despite this guidance, WFU is not always a clear component of the agencies' fire management strategy nor has it been fully embraced at all levels of the agency.**

Of note, the Forest Service's FY2008 budget proposes a change in fire management that recognizes that wildland fires can be managed differently, depending on the risk they pose, and includes plans to increase WFU. Yet, something as institutionalized as fire management cannot be changed overnight. To ensure the success of fiscally minded and ecologically appropriate fire management reform, the agency, policymakers and stakeholders must:

- Recognize Wildland Fire Use is an explicit component of the new "risk-based suppression approach".
- Change fire policy to allow managers to "get credit" for those acres treated using WFU and to manage a fire as both a suppression and a WFU action.
- Change land management planning to better integrate fire management. WFU, not suppression, should be the "default" action, with the management plan designating specific areas (like near communities) where WFU would not be appropriate.
- Increase public education and acceptance of WFU.
- Ensure that monitoring is in place to evaluate, and adapt as necessary, this new "risk-based suppression" approach.
- Reward personnel for increasing WFU.
- Designate resources specifically for the training and staffing needed to expand WFU.
- Integrate non-federal stakeholders, particularly those communities that will be impacted by these management changes on federal lands.
- Overcome internal resistance to expanding WFU through staff education, leadership within the agency, and partnerships with outside stakeholders.

Fire experts and practitioners have suggested that, in the long run, suppression and WFU should be merged into a common approach that acknowledges a full range of management options. **TWS supports this long-term vision for managing wildland fire.**