

Wildland Fire

Our Vision

The Wilderness Society envisions a landscape composed of fire-safe communities and fire-resilient lands in a network of healthy wildland ecosystems. Where safe, we want fire to play its natural role—free of human control. Where natural fire is not safe, its beneficial role can be sustained through active management—either through prescribed burning or by managing the ecosystem to be resilient to uncontrolled wildfire. Where natural fire must be excluded, we want communities prepared to suppress or to deflect fire from their door.



Firefighting professionals using controlled burn as management tool.
Photo by John McCarthy, The Wilderness Society

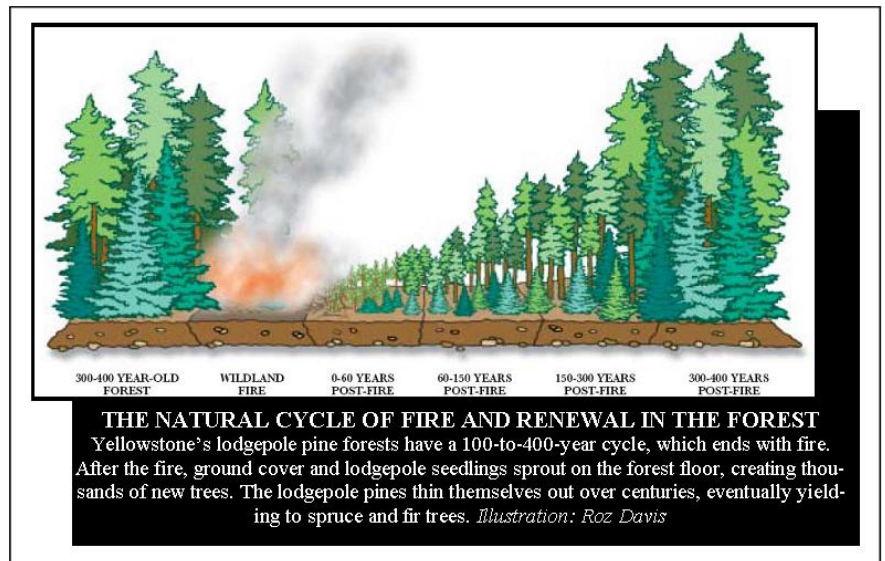
The Wilderness Society Takes Part in Finding Solutions

The Wilderness Society works collaboratively with local groups, land managers, and communities to support fire management strategies with social and ecological benefits. By building partnerships based on social and economic well-being of communities and long-term forest health, The Wilderness Society brings about enduring change in fire and forest management. Our coalition work brings together groups from across the spectrum of interested stakeholders, including those that have not worked with one another in recent years. Our partners include conservation groups, professional foresters, federal agencies, rural communities, local government officials, academic and agency scientists, hunters and anglers.

As a national stakeholder, The Wilderness Society was actively engaged with the Western Governor's Association (WGA) effort to develop a comprehensive national strategy to reduce fire risk across the nation. The 10-year Comprehensive Strategy—a collaboratively developed and broadly endorsed product—has since become the glue that holds federal fire policy together. The Wilderness Society continues to work with diverse interests across the country to implement the strategy recommendations.

The Relationship between Forests and Fire

For eons fire has played an essential role in maintaining the health and resiliency of many ecosystems. For as long as there have been forests, there have been wildland fires. Wildland fire is as natural and necessary as sunshine or rain to the health of a forest. Nature uses fire to transform dead and dying material into nutrients, to control insect populations, and to provide living conditions for wildlife. Burned trees provide critical habitat for many animals and their slow decay provides nutrients essential to rejuvenating growth. In fact, logging after a fire and replanting trees is not



necessary to restore a forest impacted by fire; this practice can actually increase the risk of future fire and cause irreparable damage to the landscape. Fire plays a critical role in the functioning of ecosystems. Allowing fire to resume its natural role in forest ecology will help reduce the long-term risk of severe, catastrophic fires, and in turn, reduce costs. With the wildland-urban interface growing each year and climate change lengthening fire seasons, there will never be enough resources to aggressively suppress all fires. As such, the best use of money is to suppress those fires that threaten communities and allow those fires away from communities to play their natural role in maintaining healthy ecosystems.

Fire Management Challenges

The unpredictability of climate change, increased development near wildland areas, a century of suppressing all fires, and past forestry practices have made fire management much more complicated for policymakers, legislators, and firefighters today. Climate change has increased the length of the fire season. For example, the fire season in the western United States has increased by 78 days over the past 30 years. As a result, the average number and size (but not always the severity) of fires has increased during the same time. In addition, increased drought and water shortages, and shorter winters and rainy seasons brought on by a changing climate, will lead to a drier landscape more susceptible to wildland fires.

New Fire Management Regime

People, particularly those who live within forested landscapes, understandably fear fire. Indeed, the short-term effects of fire can be seen as quite damaging to the ecosystem. But what may seem devastating in the short term is part of the long-term forest rejuvenation process.

While human lives and property must be a top priority, land managers must also take into account the ecological role of fire as a management tool for maintaining and restoring the landscape. Fire is a natural part of most forests in the United States. Forests are at their healthiest when key functions and processes—including fire—are most intact and it is these forests that will be best able to adapt to and withstand the effects of a changing climate. Fire management approaches that incorporate a broad array of actions and strategies are necessary to ensure that land managers effectively advance forest resiliency and ecological restoration.

Forest managers have many tools at their disposal to accomplish this goal, including removing hazardous fuels, controlled burning and natural fire where it is safe.

Over the next year, The Wilderness Society will continue to be actively engaged in the following:

1) Fire Suppression Funding Solution

Fire funding is fast approaching 50 percent of the agency's budget as insufficient funds are appropriated each year for wildfire suppression. The increase comes as a response to variety of factors that include a longer fire season due to climate change, an increase in the number of people who reside in wildfire-prone areas, hazardous fuel build-up, and a budgetary process that bases wildfire suppression funding on a 10-year average cost. That average cost continues to climb, while the overall budget remains more limited. In addition, as suppression activities continue to increase, so does suppression funding since it is based on a rolling average for the previous 10 years. Because the agencies' budgets are essentially flat year to year, the ability to offset increased funding for critical programs has been significantly reduced. The result is a diminishing capacity to deliver core agency duties and programs, which is harmful to long-term prospects for reducing wildfire costs.

FY 2008 was the third consecutive year that the U.S. Forest Service ran out of money to fund the ever-skyrocketing costs of suppressing wildfires in mid-season. The shortfall forced the agency to raid the budgets of vital programs and services ready to be completed during the field season, including campground and trail maintenance, habitat enhancement, and fire prevention and safety work that would reduce the risk to homeowners and firefighters from future fires.

The long-term solution is an emergency funding account for suppressing costly fires—similar to the way the U.S. pays for natural disasters such as hurricanes. These are principles supported by a range of experts including foresters, former Forest Service chiefs, community-based forestry groups, and environmentalists.

2) Appropriate (Strategic) Management Response

In addition to creating a new fund to address the increasing costs of fire suppression, the Forest Service must invest in a 21st century fire management force. A robust commitment to new fire management strategies, such as Appropriate (Strategic) Management Response is also needed. Appropriate (Strategic) Management Response is an approach to firefighting that treats each fire individually, accounting for threats to lives and property first, but also weighing factors like ecology and landscape and then applying the appropriate response—which can include the full range of tactical responses from monitoring to aggressive attack. This change will lead to healthier landscapes and less costly fire seasons in the future. That means investing in a 21st century fire management force—an investment on par with the one made in hazardous fuels reduction. A key aspect of this investment must be funding designated for training and staffing to equip Incident Management Teams to implement the full range of management responses from suppression to capturing resource benefits of fire.

3) Prioritize State Fire Assistance Funding

Without exception, the first priority of fire management should be keeping families safe and protecting communities. The Wilderness Society's research has shown that up to 85% of the land around communities at highest risk for wildfires is state or private. However, the bulk of federal funds for wildfire management is spent on federal lands.

Since wildland fires do not discriminate on the basis of land ownership, successful fire management depends on a new level of collaboration between local, state, and federal governments. In order to make saving homes and lives truly the top priority, we must focus scarce resources in local communities. Policies are needed to get federal money to local communities, to be spent on planning and implementing locally based, collaborative community protection strategies that target acres that provide the greatest benefit.

Resources

- **Science and Policy Reports:** The Wilderness Society incorporates expert economic, policy and ecological analysis into all of its conservation work. Recent projects have included an evaluation of the quality of information that influences wildland fire policy, an analysis of the federal wildland fire budget process, and a review of the National Fire Plan.
 - **Follow the Money: National Fire Plan Funding and Implementation** reveals federal priorities for fire management and substantial accounting problems. Looks at how money originates in Washington DC through the annual appropriations process and proceeds through complex layers of the USDA Forest Service system to reach the ground where work is done. Find the report here: http://www.state.co.us/gov_dir/leg_dir/lcsstaff/2008/comsched/08WildfireIssuesWildernessIssues.pdf
 - **Climate Factsheets Series**
 - A Primer on Carbon Cycling (<http://wilderness.org/content/primer-carbon-cycling>)
 - Are Wildland Fires Making Climate Change Worse? (<http://wilderness.org/content/climate-change-facts-are-wildland-fires-making-climate-change-worse>)
 - Fossil Fuels Are A Bigger Problem Than Wildland Fires (<http://wilderness.org/content/fossil-fuels-wildland-fires>)
 - Fire and Forest Management (<http://wilderness.org/content/fire-and-forest-management>)
- **Western Governors' Association Updated Implementation Plan:** The Wilderness Society worked with a group of diverse stakeholders to update the Western Governors' Association (WGA) *Implementation Plan* for the *10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* (A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risk to Communities and the Environment). The *Comprehensive Strategy* is one of the key elements of the National Fire Plan. It emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach to wildland fire management and focuses specifically on restoring fire-adapted ecosystems and promoting community assistance. The *Implementation Plan* is the implementing mechanism for the *Strategy*. This updated *Implementation Plan* reaffirms the commitment to collaboration on the part of all stakeholders and establishes important new steps towards the restoration of fire to fire-adapted ecosystems. Find the report here: <http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/plan/documents/7-19-en.pdf>
- **Mapping Fire-Prone Forests:** We work with communities to help identify where the greatest areas of fire risk are so they can prioritize accordingly. We also collaborate with community residents and local stakeholders to ensure that scarce federal funds for fuel reduction are spent where they are needed most—protecting homes and communities as articulated in Community Wildfire Planning Processes. The following page provides one example of the types of maps we work with communities to create for use when making decisions about fire planning and mitigation. This map shows our rendition of the Community Fire Planning Zone (CFPZ) in California.

For more information on the The Wilderness Society Wildland Fire Program contact: Tom Fry at (303)650-5818 ext. 110 or tom_fry@tws.org, Dr. Greg Aplet at (303)650-5818 ext. 104 or greg_aplet@tws.org, or Cecilia Clavet at (202)429-2663 or cecilia_clavet@tws.org.