Wildfire and Wilderness
A Brief Primer

The Wilderness Act provides broad and flexible guidance for managing fire in wilderness areas. This primer provides background on wildfire management law and policy within wilderness areas, and includes a specific focus on Forest Service law and regulation.

What are the objectives of fire management in wilderness?

Except as otherwise provided in the Wilderness Act, wilderness areas are managed to preserve their wilderness character and the Wilderness Act generally prohibits use of motorized vehicles and motorized equipment though exceptions are allowed in certain circumstances. The Wilderness Act also provides that "…such measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire, insects, and diseases, subject to such conditions as the Secretary deems desirable." (16 U.S.C. 1133(d)(1)).

Federal fire policy states, "Firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity." (Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy). This is true both inside and outside wilderness, and wilderness designation does not prevent fire managers from suppressing fires when conditions warrant. Forest Service Policy (FSM 5131.03) requires human-caused wildfires to be suppressed. A key objective of wilderness fire management is to "reduce, to an acceptable level, the risks and consequences of wildfire within wilderness or escaping from wilderness." (FSM 2324.21).

Recently-burned larch forest in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. Photo: Travis Belote.

While fire managers may choose to suppress fire inside or outside of wilderness, it is also federal policy to use fire "to protect, maintain, and enhance resources and, as nearly as possible, be allowed to function in its natural ecological role." (Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy). Often, wilderness, because of its remoteness from resources at risk, is the best place to achieve this goal. Also, wilderness ignitions are often in steep, rugged terrain and therefore are too dangerous for firefighters to attack directly. Suppression may not be the appropriate management response to a fire in wilderness.

Are fires managed differently in wilderness?

Within wilderness, the Forest Service aims to permit lightning-caused fires to play a natural ecological role and reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire both within and outside the wilderness. (FSM 2324.21). The Forest Service seeks to prevent fires from escaping and causing damage to nearby communities. In pursuit of that goal, the Forest Service gives preference to methods, called Minimum Impact Suppression Techniques, that cause the least alteration of the wilderness resource and the least disturbance to the land surface, air quality, and visitor solitude. (FSM 2324.23). In short, the agency protects the wilderness resource wherever possible. As with fires outside of wilderness, lightning-

caused wildfires in national forest wilderness are suppressed if they are not within a landscape where a fire management plan documents preplanned, specified conditions and objectives are being met. (FSM 2324.22, 5131.03)

What "pre-suppression" activities are allowed in wilderness?

Pre-suppression activities are management actions taken in advance of wildfire that are intended to affect fire behavior and aid control. The Wilderness Act does not explicitly mention pre-suppression activities in wilderness. In determining whether to undertake pre-suppression activities to meet the objectives of fire management in wilderness, managers first determine whether action is necessary, then identify alternatives, and select the alternative that is the minimum necessary to meet agency objectives and agency policy.

Forest Service regulations authorize the use of prescribed fire to reduce unnatural fuel buildups within wilderness if needed to meet wilderness fire management objectives, and: (1) fuel management outside of wilderness will not achieve fire management objectives within wilderness; (2) prescribed fire within wilderness is recommended by an interdisciplinary team; (3) the interested public has been involved in the decision; and (4) lightning caused fires cannot be allowed to burn because they will pose serious threats to wilderness resources or life and property or natural resources outside of wilderness. (FSM 2324.22). In general, prescribed fire is allowed within wilderness as long as it is being used to manage fuels to make it easier to use natural fire in the future or to reduce the risks and consequences of fire inside and outside wilderness. Prescribed fire may not be used in wilderness solely to benefit wildlife, vegetation, forage, or other resource values.

Mechanical treatment and prescribed fire may be utilized within wilderness where consistent with the Wilderness Act and agency regulations, as when necessary to protect public safety. (FSM 2323.52). However, such tools are rarely considered in wilderness because wilderness rarely rises to the priority for treatment that landscapes closer to communities do.

What are the benefits of managing fire in wilderness?

Fire, behaving within its historical range of variation, has been shown to lower fuel loads, diversify and renew vegetation structure, create wildlife habitat, renew soil nutrients, and limit the growth of subsequent fires. Managing fires for their benefits has also been shown to lower exposure of firefighters to risk and to reduce per-acre costs of fire management relative to suppression.

Federal fire policy and Forest Service wilderness policy recognize the important role that fire plays in ecosystems. Natural fire reduces fuel loads and, as discussed above, prescribed fire may be used to reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire within and outside of wilderness. Changes to fire management guidance in 2009 allow fires to be managed for multiple objectives, achieving benefits where appropriate in one part of the fire, while battling undesired effects (such as threats to communities) on a different part of the fire. These changes give fire managers greater flexibility both to protect resources and to meet wilderness objectives of fire management on any given incident.

Compiled by Dr. Greg Aplet, Senior Science Director (greg_aplet@tws.org, 303-650-5861) and Paul Spitler, Director of Wilderness Campaigns (paul_spitler@tws.org, 202-360-1912). Revised: December 12, 2014