



POLICY STATEMENT:
WESTERN FORESTRY LEADERSHIP COALITION

FORESTLANDS AT RISK: Forest Health and Wildfire

Summary Statement:

Overly dense forests on federal and non-federal lands are threatening communities, vital watersheds, key wildlife habitats, important old-growth forests and popular recreation areas in much of the west. The current condition of these forestlands has significantly increased the risk of damaging wildfires and insect and disease outbreaks. The need for management action is high with over 89 million acres of forestland at moderate to high risk of catastrophic wildfire and over 21 million acres at risk to western bark beetle attack. Inaction will exacerbate conditions and will lead to increased risk of catastrophic wildfires, insect and disease outbreaks. Specific actions are required to reverse this trend. We believe it is more cost effective and efficient to proactively address forest conditions than to respond to the resulting negative impacts.

Background:

The condition of our nation's forest lands, both federal and non-federal, is a significant contributor to the ongoing problem of catastrophic wildfire, particularly in lower elevation, dry forests. Fire regimes are highly modified, resulting in abnormally destructive wildfire behavior (catastrophic wildfire), undesirable fire effects, substantially increased fire suppression costs and additional risk to life and property.

Further, although less dramatic than the recent wildfires of 2002, tree mortality from bark beetles and other forest pests is also increasing above and beyond acceptable levels in many areas of the west due to continuing drought conditions and overcrowded forests.

The primary causes for these declines in forest health are altered forest stand conditions in large part due to nearly a century of fire exclusion, specifically; increasing tree and shrub densities, shifting tree and understory species composition, an uncharacteristic age-composition distribution and an accumulation of dead fuels. These causes are subtle points for an American public that generally associates more trees on the landscape with vigorous forest health. Unfortunately, the real picture is more complex and troubling.

The 68,230 fires of the 2002 wildfire season scorched near 7.1 million acres; close to double the 10-year average. In response, the President, Governors and many State, local and non-governmental interests have proposed ways to increase the timeliness and effectiveness of our management response.

However, small-scale and insufficient forest health restoration and wildfire mitigation work, decades of wildfire suppression, reduced active management on federal forestlands and the overall lack of cross-boundary, community-based restoration projects have combined to hamper forestland managers' ability to get ahead of the curve and proactively address forest health and catastrophic wildfire threats. The economic, ecological and social results of these barriers to progress are unacceptable.

Position:

The WFLC believes that continuity of programs for community fire assistance, restoration and fuels reduction efforts tied to forest health under the National Fire Plan, combined with an emphasis on both

wildland-urban interface (WUI) and landscape-level work will go a long way in reducing the negative impacts of forest health on communities and the environment. We need to actively restore, protect and maintain forest ecosystems within the context of their natural disturbance regimes to meet our social, economic and environmental needs. Concurrently, we must reduce the number of landowners, communities and natural resources at risk from unwanted wildfire, insects and disease acting well beyond their traditional and essential ecological roles in the forest.

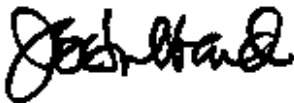
Public participation and community input consistent with landowner objectives must continue to be a key element in identifying and assessing forest health restoration projects. A locally driven, collaborative framework for project development, selection and monitoring is spelled out in the 10-year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy and Implementation Plan. It needs to be heralded to promote public trust and positive, timely results on the ground.

Specific Actions/Goal:

Our goal is to move the public policy debate on forest health and wildfire forward, away from the current entrenched political battles that continue to exacerbate the problem through inaction. Our success is contingent upon the following specific actions:

- Balancing National Fire Plan programs with particular attention to rehabilitation/restoration and community assistance needs.
- Refining forest management tools and analytical processes for federal land managers that accelerate restoration treatments.
- Implementing the plan to protect and restore our western forests detailed in the “Western Bark Beetle Report,” USDA Forest Service, 4/22/02 (www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/publications.html).
- Better balancing of short-term risks to species, air quality, and water quality versus the long-term health of forest habitats, airsheds, and watersheds in forest management and policy decisions.
- Strategic and linked planning of forest health restoration projects on all lands and across jurisdictional boundaries.
- Accomplishment of the 23 action items and application of the framework for collaboration outlined in the Implementation Plan (www.fireplan.gov/10yrIPfinal.cfm) for the 10-year Comprehensive Wildfire Strategy (www.fireplan.gov/FIRE.REPORT.1.pdf).

The complex and widespread nature of forest health issues mean that fixes will require time to take shape, but the immediacy is no less and we must begin today.



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Date Signed: January 17, 2003

Expiration Date: Two years from date of signing