

Review Team Finds Fire Policy Sound But ‘Application Needs Changing’

By Bruce M. Kilgore

On Sept. 28, 1988, the Secretaries of the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior appointed a 10-person interagency Fire Management Policy Review Team to investigate and recommend modifications to agencies' current fire management policies for national parks and federally designated Wilderness Areas. NPS representatives on that team were Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, and Bruce Kilgore, Western Regional Chief Scientist.

In its 12/14/88 report, the Team indicated the objectives and the philosophy behind the current prescribed natural fire policies in national parks and wilderness areas are fundamentally sound. But these policies, which permit lightning-caused fire to burn under predetermined conditions (prescribed natural fire), need to be refined, strengthened, and reaffirmed.

The 10-page report, published in the 12/20/88 Federal Register, noted that the ecological effects of prescribed fire support resource objectives in parks and wilderness, but in some cases the social and economic effects may be unacceptable. Prescribed natural fires may affect permitted uses of parks and wilderness, such as recreation, and may also impact areas outside parks through such phenomena as smoke and stream sedimentation. The report called for major changes in policy implementation to limit application to legitimate prescribed fire programs and to prevent any inappropriate uses of these policies.

The report contains 14 specific recommendations for strengthening and reaffirming existing fire management policies in wilderness and national parks. For example, it noted that many current fire management plans do not meet current policy, and that so-called weather and fuel "prescriptions" for use of prescribed fire do not place enough limits on fire management decisions. To meet these deficiencies, the panel report recommends plans be strengthened by joint interagency planning along common boundaries, by improving weather and fuel prescriptions, and by clearly identifying areas needing protection from fire—including developments within or adjacent to wilderness and parks.

To ensure implementation of these concepts at the field level, the report recommends a certification process whereby each line manager confirms daily that adequate suppression resources are available to assure that a prescribed natural fire will remain in prescription, given reasonably foreseeable weather conditions and fire behavior, or that the fire will be declared a wildfire, and appropriate suppression will be initiated.

Other important changes in policy implementation include:

- Federal agencies will reaffirm their policy that fires are either prescribed fires or wildfires.
- No prescribed natural fires will be allowed to burn until fire management plans meet the revised implementation requirements contained in the report.
- Federal agencies will develop regional and national contingency plans to provide necessary program monitoring and direction, including curtailment of prescribed fire activities when necessary.
- Agencies will re-evaluate opportunities to use agency-ignited fires (prescribe burns) to complement prescribed natural fires (lightning-ignited) programs

and to reduce hazard fuels, particularly around developments and near boundaries where there are high values at risk.

- Agencies will strengthen training programs and establish additional full-time regional fire coordinators to ensure the availability of fully qualified staff and knowledgeable line officers for developing, implementing, and managing prescribed fire programs.

- The National Wildfire Coordinating Group should take the lead in developing common terminology for prescribed burning programs and wildfire suppression alternatives.

- Agencies will develop joint criteria for selecting appropriate suppression tactics in wilderness and parks. Preplanning should include these tactics.

- Agencies will improve the understanding and acceptance of the policy of using suppression tactics that meet fire management objectives and minimize impacts on wilderness and parks.

- The National Wildfire Coordinating Group needs to develop interagency guidelines for light-hand-on-the-land suppression tactics.

- Agencies will ensure that the NEPA process is followed for fire management plans.

- The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture will review methods of funding prescribed fire and fire protection programs to improve interagency effectiveness. Planning and presuppression activities need program funds rather than emergency funds.

- Interpretation and public information before and during fires will be improved to provide timely, accurate, and consistent information on the purpose, presence, and status of prescribed natural fires.

- Joint research, involving both USDI and USDA, will seek to improve the ability to predict severe fire behavior, to forecast long-term fire weather, and to find ways to prescribe burn forests using stand-replacement fires.

The 12/20/88 report was the subject of 11 public meetings held throughout the country the first two weeks of February, 1989; written comments were solicited until February 21, 1989. A careful review will be made of such public input—both from the public meetings and from written submissions, and the Review Team will meet again to consider what additional modifications may be appropriate in view of such suggestions from the public and any additional review considered necessary by individual land management agencies. It is expected that approved policy implementation changes can be in place prior to the 1989 western fire season.

The NPS Branch of Fire Management at Boise is gearing up to review all NPS fire management plans; individual prescribed natural fire programs will be suspended until plans have been certified as being in conformance with NPS and DOI policies. A comprehensive wildland fire management program called FIREPRO 3 is in its final stages of development. Based on a thorough analysis of fire occurrence on lands managed by the NPS, the program will professionalize this high-risk program throughout the agency. For example, full-time regional fire coordinators would have responsibility for allocating fire management resources on a nationwide basis. The program would also provide for a substantial increase in presuppres-

sion activities to reduce hazardous fuels near park boundaries and developed areas.

In transmitting the report to the Secretaries, the Review Team noted the important role of fire in natural ecosystems, but indicated that it believed that the suggested improvements in fire management policy implementation will reduce the risk of repeating the experience of this past summer. Everyone realizes, however, there are limitations to what any fire management program can accomplish when extremely dry and windy conditions occur in forests with the heavy fuel loads found in Yellowstone and similar forest types in 1988. Some high intensity fires will occur in these forests, regardless of our best efforts, but we need to be certain to have used our best efforts.

Kilgore is Chief, Division of Natural Resources and Research, Western Region.