



Strategic Fire Management Zones

Frequently Asked Questions

Why create strategic fire management zones in the draft forest plans?

Strategic fire management zones were developed based on a southern Sierra Nevada wildfire risk assessment. The assessment used a wildfire risk assessment to spatially model and assess contemporary wildfire risk across the forest plan area. The goal of the strategic fire management zones is to support decision makers by providing areas for which wildfire risk and potential benefits have been assessed before a wildfire starts. Organizing forest plan guidance by these zones can also aid wildfire management decisions that meet the full range of plan objectives for resource benefits.

The strategic fire management zones and associated forest plan components help implement the National Cohesive Fire Strategy and new Forest Service agency policy, while spatially informing and supporting wildfire management decision-making.

What are the strategic fire management zones?

The draft forest plans address fire management using a risk-based approach that replaces a distance-based approach. The draft plans use strategic fire management zones in which we determine before a wildfire starts, how best to manage fire in that area. Certain zones have differing fire management objectives, some focused primarily on community protection, while others focus on managing wildfires where and when they can result in resource benefits. We are seeking ways to increase the opportunity to manage wildfires to reduce fuels but not threaten communities or structures and to improve the forest conditions where it is safe for firefighters and the public. The strategic fire management zones include:

- Community Wildfire Protection Zone
- General Wildfire Protection Zone
- Wildfire Restoration Zone
- Wildfire Maintenance Zone

What is the Community Wildfire Protection Zone?

This zone encompasses locations where hazardous fuel conditions currently put communities, community assets and private land at a very high risk of damage from wildfire. Wildfires that start in this zone contribute more to potential loss of community assets than any other strategic fire management zone. Under most conditions, wildfire mitigation, fuel reduction treatments and fire protection is needed in this zone to prevent direct threats to life or property. Wildfire in this zone is suppressed under most conditions due to the significant risk, potential economic loss and public safety concerns.

Within this zone, community buffer areas are identified to strategically mitigate vegetation directly adjacent to structures and allow for safer conditions for firefighters. Although some wildfires in this zone can potentially benefit natural resources and help decrease fuels and threats from future wildfires, these potential benefits are less likely under most weather, fuel moisture, and other environmental conditions due to the very high risk to community assets during the fire season. The long term focus is to create fire-adapted communities that are less reliant on aggressive wildfire protection.

What is the General Wildfire Protection Zone?

This zone identifies where conditions currently put some natural resource values at high risk of damage from wildfire; wildfires that start in this zone contribute to the high fire risk in the community wildfire protection zone. Managing wildfires to meet resource objectives in this zone is often considerably constrained due to fuel conditions, the high risk of loss of natural resources and the potential adverse impacts to communities threatened by wildfires starting in this zone. Although some wildfires that burn here can potentially benefit some natural resources, high negative impacts to many natural resources are more likely under most weather, fuel moisture, and other environmental conditions during the fire season. Targeted ecological restoration and hazardous fuel reduction are needed in this zone to better safeguard communities and resources.

What is the Wildfire Restoration Zone?

The wildfire restoration zone identifies where conditions currently put some natural resource values at moderate risk of damage from wildfire. In general, wildfires that start in this zone pose a low to moderate threat to communities in average fire season conditions. Wildfires that burn in this zone can potentially benefit natural resources, but only under limited environmental conditions. Managing wildfires to meet resource objectives in this zone can be constrained due to fuel conditions and moderate risk to natural resources from wildfire. This zone is where some ecological restoration is needed in order to use wildland fire under a wider range of weather, fuel moisture, and other environmental conditions.

What is the Wildfire Maintenance Zone?

The wildfire maintenance zone poses a low threat to communities in average fire season conditions, and conditions allow natural resources to benefit from most wildland fire. Managing wildfire to meet resource objectives in this zone is the least constrained, and implementing prescribed fire for ecological restoration is favorable. Ecological maintenance can be carried out by the management of wildland fire under a wide range of weather, fuel moisture, and other environmental conditions.

What is a community buffer?

Community buffers are areas around structures adjacent to or surrounded by national forest system lands that currently have high fire risk and where fuels reduction treatments are designed to reduce fire behavior and intensity. Human health and safety are the primary values at risk within these areas. Community buffers are found within the community wildfire protection zone.

What is “net value change”?

The term “net value change” refers to how the value of combined resources and assets change as a result of fire, either with a benefit or a loss. Net value change was calculated and applied to assist with the development of strategic fire management zones. Sometimes this is referred to as the “risk” of fire. However, the value of the resource or asset can actually increase due to fire. Some refer to this as “positive risk.” Because the word risk typically has a negative connotation, we prefer to use the term “net value change” to avoid negative implications when the net value change is positive. Net value change is calculated based on identifying highly-valued resources and assets in the area of interest and then evaluating the response of that area to various fire situations via fire modeling.

What is a “POD”?

The term “POD” refers to potential wildfire operation delineations. PODs were used in creating the strategic fire management zones. These are areas that are bounded by real fire management features (e.g., roads, rivers, major ridges, barren areas) that are used as summary units to make wildfire risk assessment outputs more meaningful in a wildfire operational management context. These are areas mapped by local wildfire management specialists that could likely contain wildfires with the aid of fire management resources.

How do strategic fire management zones relate to the National Cohesive Fire Strategy goal of restoring and maintaining landscapes through the use of wildland fire?

The strategic fire management zones were created using a [landscape scale wildfire risk assessment](#) that assists decision makers with managing uncertainty and facilitating wildland fire management by assessing risk prior to a wildfire. This includes decisions to: increase the amount of wildfire managed to meet resource objectives; and increase fuel reduction treatments using prescribed fire and mechanical methods.

How do strategic fire management zones relate to the National Cohesive Fire Strategy goal of working with partners to create fire-adapted communities?

The new risk-based strategic fire management zones provide more certainty of highly valued resources and asset location, allowing for:

- Identification of communities that are at risk of loss from wildfire

- Enhanced protection and prevention in high wildfire risk areas
- Enhanced wildfire response in areas of high risk
- An increase in fuel reduction treatments (including prescribed fire) and wildfires managed to meet resource objectives to create more fire-adapted communities

How do strategic fire management zones relate to the National Cohesive Fire Strategy goal of improving safe and effective fire response?

The strategic fire management zones provide more certainty by categorizing risk, allowing for safe and effective fire response by:

- Identifying values at risk and how they will be positively or negatively affected by wildfire.
- Knowing the location of values and how they are affected by wildfire will allow for the appropriate wildfire response.
- Knowing the location of values allows managers to concentrate efforts on protection objectives in times of fire response resource shortages.

How do strategic fire management zones affect Community Wildfire Protection Plans?

Strategic fire management zones do not affect existing community wildfire protection plans (CWPP)s. However, the risk-based strategic fire management zones are management areas in the revised forest plans with plan components (i.e., desired conditions, standards, and guidelines). Plan components for the community wildfire protection and general wildfire protection zones align with the priorities in a [CWPP](#) by providing protection of life, property and critical infrastructure. CWPPs are developed to bring communities and their federal neighbors together to discuss management options and implications when making wildfire decisions, as well as the consideration to the priorities of local communities as they develop fuel reduction treatments. Communities and federal partners should refer to the strategic fire management zones as new CWPPs are revised and developed.

How will the new strategic fire management zones affect new Community Wildfire Protection Plans?

As new CWPPs are developed, the strategic fire management zones and results from the wildfire risk assessment should be considered. The Forest Service is implementing the risk assessment across all national forests in the Pacific Southwest Region, therefore it is important to engage early with cooperators involved in CWPP development to ensure information sharing is occurring.

How do strategic fire management zones change the designation of the wildland urban interface in relation to CWPPs and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act?

The new risk-based strategic fire management zones were informed by a [landscape scale wildfire risk assessment](#). This assessment will be a valuable resource in assisting communities to define the wildland urban interface (WUI) when developing a CWPP. The new fire management zones do not change the designation of the WUI nor do they change the WUI communities identified in the Federal Register. As communities develop or revise their CWPPs, they should develop a local community risk assessment to prioritize treatments in their WUI under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act.

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