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National Fire Plan

Wildland Fire Use:

Managing the land for the benefit of the resources

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Fires are a natural part of the Forest Ecosystem. In other words, fire can and should play a role in shaping the form and function of a natural forest ecosystem, especially wilderness ecosystems. Fire is as much a part of forests as trees, soil, water, and wind.

Fire is a natural part of the western landscape. Fires have been burning here since the last ice age.

Decisions about suppressing wildfires in wilderness areas need to be based on an acknowledgment of a fire's potential positive effects versus its potential negative effects. Since wilderness is by definition generally free of buildings, fences, and other facilities, not to mention human habitation, non-suppression of a wildfire typically presents more potentially positive effects compared to negative effects.

The mission of a fire use manager/team is to verify that a fire being managed for resource benefits is exhibiting fire behavior within predicted parameters. Teams do this by observing the fire, measuring its rate of spread and intensity, assessing fuels in the fire's path, and mapping it. A big part of the job is determining a set of management action points the fire might reach; managers then match commensurate management actions to take if and when the fire reaches these points. These actions could include trail closures, wrapping structures, work on putting out spot fires in front of the fire front, limited suppression action, etc.

Wildland Fire Use Fires in the Bob Marshall Wilderness:
Several lightning-caused fires started on July 19. Upon evaluation, they met the necessary criteria to manage them for positive effects. Land managers overseeing the Bob Marshall Wilderness have a plan to evaluate each fire that occurs and determine the most appropriate action to take with a fire. These actions could include putting the fire out (suppression), containing or confining a fire (using constructed or natural barriers to keep the fire in a general location) or managing the fire in a 'fire use' status. These fires went through detailed analysis to determine which appropriate status to place them in. The process is described in the National Wildland Policy and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex Fire Guidebook. Factors that are considered are the time of the season, weather patterns, fuels, other ongoing fires, available resources, fire location, and social concerns/needs. The fire history in the wilderness provides another tool to utilize as we evaluate every fire. This history shows the natural fire patterns that have occurred on the landscape and contribute to the wildness and naturalness of the wilderness.

Instead of suppressing these fires, our decision was to take the appropriate and necessary action on these fires—which in this case is to manage them for the benefits they offer to wilderness resources and values.

The goal of the fire use policy is to restore the natural balance in wilderness by adopting land management practices that integrate fire back into ecosystems as an essential natural process.

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Naturally occurring lightning fires can be used to reduce the buildup of dead and downed trees and curb insect and disease infestations, while releasing and recycling nutrients essential for the growth and reproduction of many plant and animal species.

Different plant and animal species need to have various amounts of vegetation removed by fire to become established or reestablished in an area. In heavily burned areas, even with surface vegetation removed, seeds of some types of plants have remained in the soil, often for hundreds of years, waiting for their opportunity to sprout. Roots remain to resprout in the following spring. In moderately burned areas, plant and animal species are dependent on bare ground for habitat to find suitable conditions to thrive in. These species may only establish themselves and thrive after a fire occurs. Areas that are unburned can provide continuity for the existing species.

The pinyon-juniper is an invasive species in some areas. In the Southwest there are greater densities due to fire suppression.

Natural systems are not static; they are always changing. Plant and animal communities change as part of natural systems and processes. The Wilderness Act directs that natural processes be allowed to operate freely. Management strives to allow this to happen for the short and long term benefits of the wilderness resource.

The Little Salmon Complex of 2003:
Land managers expect a number of beneficial effects resulting from managing the Little Salmon Complex of fires as a wildland use fires.

These fires will accomplish the following:

- Enhance nutrient cycling – By releasing soil nutrients stored in wood, fire in effect returns these nutrients to the soil, making them available for new plants to use.
- Sustain forest types – Tree species such as whitebark pine, lodgepole pine, and western larch depend to a degree on fire for regeneration. A healthy ecosystem contains a variety of trees growing at different ages. This is necessary because some species respond well to recently burned areas, while others respond well to areas that haven't burned in a long time.
- Keep wilderness dynamic – Fire is one agent that keeps wilderness what it is. Without fire's cleansing and rejuvenating effects, wilderness slowly loses its diversity of plants, animals, landscapes, and processes. 'Fire Use' fires closely mimic what historic natural fires did for ecosystems.

Fire managers and line officers have established a comprehensive set of trigger points and associated actions to take if and when the fire reaches these points. Trigger points are key locations in the fire's actual or potential path. If the fire reaches a certain point, that might trigger further area closures, for example. Or, if the fire reaches a concentration of fuel in a certain spot, that might trigger fire managers to initiate bucket drops in order to slow down the fire as it moves through that fuel pocket.

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Sample Management Action Point

Management Action Point 18
Fire becomes established near the confluence of White River and South Fork of White River.

Action: Re-evaluate threat to area beyond MMA Segment 9, based on weather forecast, time of season, and potential fire movement. Prevent fire from being established in South Fork White River drainage and implement trail closures. Use appropriate aerial resources to implement delaying actions by hot-spotting fire front (if practical) and/or spots fires in the drainage. Continue actions as fire moves up valley. Insert a monitoring crew for intelligence gathering. Move firefighter module, with appropriate leadership, to Indian Point Administrative Site and begin structure protection. Have REDCARDED personnel at Prairie Reef Lookout. Start structure protection discussions with K Bar L Ranch.

Trail Closures:
202 – to wilderness boundary
203 (West Fork Sun River) to Junction with Trail 209 (Ahorn)
211 (Indian Creek) from junction with Trail 203 (West Fork Sun River) to White River Pass
And/or implement area closure on Lewis and Clark.

Resources Needed:
Appropriate aerial resources and leadership
Monitoring crew
Firefighter module with appropriate leadership

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