

Bush Directs Federal Agencies to Get Aggressive on Reducing Dangers from Wildfires

President Announces New Initiative to Promote Healthy Forests and Safe Communities

President Bush today released the details of a new initiative to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and improve forest health. Dubbed “The Healthy Forests Initiative,” it directs Agriculture Secretary Veneman, Interior Secretary Norton, and Council on Environmental Quality Chairman Connaughton to improve regulatory processes to ensure timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results to prevent the personal toll and environmental damage caused by catastrophic wildfires. The President issued the call for increased management to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires during a tour today of the Squires fire in Medford, Oregon.

The Initiative will include improving procedures for development of fuels treatment and forest restoration projects, establishing a process for concurrent project clearance by federal agencies, develop guidance for weighing the short-term environmental risks against the long-term environmental and social benefits of fuels projects, and develop guidance for consistent National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) procedures.

President Bush will also work with Congress on legislation to authorize agencies to enter into long-term stewardship contracts with the private sector and expedite fuels reduction projects in high priority areas, consistent with legislation already passed by the Congress in July. The President will also ask for legislation that ensures that the courts give appropriate weight to the long-term benefits of fuels treatment versus other short-term risks and remove a legislative rider that has imposed extraordinary procedural requirements for Forest Service appeals. Finally President Bush will ask that the Congress pass legislation that will supplement Interior and Agriculture’s efforts to fulfill the original promise of the Northwest Forest Plan.

Secretary Veneman noted, “the 2002 fire season is already one of the worst in modern history. These fires have driven tens of thousands of people from their homes, destroyed more than 2000 homes and structures and led to the death of 20 firefighters. These fires have also killed billions of trees, old and young, devastated habitat and severely damaged forest soils and watersheds for decades to come.” Secretary Norton added, “We applaud the President for taking this important step to protect people, communities and the environment”.