
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service's wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

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Chapter 8. Cost or Investment?

“The growth and fire costs [are] crippling the agency's ability to conserve the Nation's forests and grasslands and to provide the multiple uses and values for which the agency was created.”

—“The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations,” USDA Forest Service

The cost of fire operations has increased steadily over the past 15 years, with an all-time high expenditure of $2.4 billion during the 2017 fire season. “The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations,” published in 2015, found that wildfire operations represented 16 percent of the Forest Service budget in 1995 and projected that number to surpass 67 percent by 2025. Focus group participants agreed that this projected trend has already been fully realized, with $3.9 billion of the Forest Service's $6.1 billion 2019 budget going to the fire organization just to maintain the status quo.

What’s the difference?

Cost vs. Investment

Oxford’s dictionary defines cost as: “an amount that has to be paid or spent to buy or obtain something.” It simply represents an outflow with no return specified.

Investment, on the other hand, means: “an act of devoting time, effort, or energy to a particular undertaking with the expectation of a worthwhile result.” This term implies that what you spend today yields something of value in the future.

What benefits, advantages, and value does the Forest Service hope to achieve? And what is the agency willing to invest to make those things a reality?

“The Rising Cost of Wildfire Operations” found the continually increasing cost of fire operations has been “significantly impacting all nonfire program and staff areas.” This begs the question, “Is this level of fire spending and focus on suppression affecting the ability of the Forest Service to successfully manage forests?” Most participants believed the answer to that question was, “Yes.” Ensuing discussions highlighted system drivers, such as internal beliefs, organizational conditions, and external pressures that may be preventing the agency from fully adopting a long-term investment mindset.

“We are constantly talking about fiscal costs, and we're not talking about fiscal investments.”

—Wildland Fire Module Supervisor, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

Wildland Fire and Budget Policies Encourage Cost Over Investment

Participants highlighted the current spending model as biased towards fire suppression, noting that it is structured to support virtually unlimited suppression spending but closely scrutinizes, and invests little in, hazard fuels reduction or prescribed fire. While the Forest Service has developed a significant and important capacity to mobilize resources on a large scale in a short amount of time to address major crises, the agency approaches project funding, planning, and implementation very differently. Focus group participants expressed frustration over the inability to mobilize resources and share
funding across agencies for planned actions, such as prescribed fire, which are often mired in bureaucratic red tape. The differences in spending structure between suppression and non-suppression activities inadvertently puts the agency at odds with the goals articulated in the [Cohesive Strategy](#) and those committed to in the [2019 Chief’s Letter of Intent](#) which call for long-term investments.

“There are so many barriers for us to spend that money on restoration. Everything in our system is stacked up against us from doing that. Appropriations law, internal policy—firm walls that forbid us from spending that million dollars on restoration quickly and so the fire side wins.”

—Regional Fire Director, Society Focus Group

Allocating scarce resources to long-term, landscape-scale investments (e.g., fuel reduction) poses the challenge of comparing fuzzy, future benefits with tangible costs today. Today will usually win out over tomorrow, much less 10 years from now. Focus group participants clearly stated that while decision makers may know what long-term benefits will look like from prescribed fire treatments, they are faced with the challenge of quantifying them with the same certainty as suppressing a fire. It is much easier to say, “We can save 1,000 homes,” than “We will reduce fire behavior should a fire occur again in this location in the future.”

Participants acknowledged that at times, there might be very good reasons for prioritizing immediate risks and costs over long-term risks and investments. However, the difficulty is in meeting the immediate demands while working to achieve the long-term goals.

“With fire, there’s too many ‘what ifs.’ There’s too many ‘if-ands.’ There’s too many hypotheticals to talk about it as an investment. You can’t talk about an investment in the fire workforce paying off in the long term, when every time we talk about fire in the moment, it’s talking about a cost.”

—District Fire Management Officer, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

Recognizing the need to think long-term and the necessity of tracking the efficiency and effectiveness of investments as they are made, the Cohesive Strategy calls for agencies to:

- “Track priority investments by Cohesive Strategy goal, over time with the intent of establishing trend information (where applicable) on the effects of investments to achieve goal outcomes.”

- “Help assess which investments are the most cost-effective means of achieving the goals in order to make informed investment tradeoffs with respect to wildland fire program appropriations.”

Firefighters working together to cool off an area of heat on a wildfire. National Interagency Fire Center photo.
However, shifting the Forest Service from management and budget decisions that operate on a 1- to 3-year cycle to long-term investment decisions that span decades requires changes in practices and perspectives that may be deeply imbedded in current Forest Service policy and culture. Focus group participants consistently expressed the difficulty in adjusting to a long-term investment mindset needed to accomplish these goals.

**Personal Liability**

“You’re always putting your career at risk when you either manage the wildfire or put in prescribed fire.”

—Fire Ecologist, Ecological Soundness Focus Group

“Yeah, essentially, we’re doing prescribed fire in August, but we’re not calling it prescribed fire.”

—Lead Forestry Tech, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

The decision to manage a fire can also create career risks that may serve as a barrier to making investment decisions. Participants spoke of concerns over personal liability should a prescribed fire or a wildfire being managed for other than full suppression act unexpectedly. There were many horror stories of personnel who lost jobs, were moved to other positions, or stripped of their fire qualifications after an escaped prescribed fire. Many worry the agency doesn’t have their back and that it is much safer to avoid those scenarios rather than expose themselves to the risk associated with planned ignitions. When faced with this risk, it is easy to see how the alternative, fire suppression, where “no one ever doubts your decision,” is compelling.

**Thinking Long Term—Investing in the Future**

“As we continue to try harder doing what we are doing, maybe we can get to [treating] 2 percent [of forest system lands annually]. But that’s not going to do it. We need a huge, turn-the-titanic-around investment.”

—Regional Fire Director, Society Focus Group

A shift to an investment perspective represents a significant organizational challenge. The first challenge is developing a consistent understanding of short term versus long term. Short term, in an ecological sense (5 to 10 years), is actually long term in an organizational budget sense. Given budget and planning policy, regulation, and law, is it possible to reorient to meet both organizational and ecological time frames?

Secondly, the Forest Service cannot accomplish the goals of the Cohesive Strategy alone. Leveraging partner resources through shared stewardship and collaboration is identified in the Cohesive Strategy. However, to do so, the fire organization may need to find ways to overcome a deeply imbedded value of self-sufficiency while also working with partner organizations that may have different views on cost and investment. It may also need to overcome current funding structures, such as the discrepancies in how agency and cooperator funds are accessed for suppression versus nonsuppression activities. While there are many examples of successful collaborations between the Forest Service, its partners, and local
communities and governments, there are also many examples of failures. Both the successful partnerships and the failed ones are rich and necessary opportunities for learning.

To truly make the shift from short-term cost to long-term investment will likely require the Forest Service to have an understanding of current reality, a clear, long-term vision of where the fire organization is trying to go, and agreed upon measures of what success or return on investment looks like.
Learning Challenge

In 2014, the Chief of the Forest Service challenged us to carry out the Cohesive Strategy. Gather your work group and discuss the following questions:

Q What does the Cohesive Strategy mean for your work group? How does your work connect to the goals in the strategy?

Q What are some specific examples from your unit where short-term costs have prevented long-term investments? What are some examples of how long-term investments, as opposed to short-term costs, have been successful?

Q What support, resources, or system incentives would you find helpful in your efforts toward building resilient landscapes and fire-adapted communities as long-term investments?

Cohesive Strategy Vision: Safely and effectively extinguish fire, when needed; use fire where allowable; manage our natural resources; and as a Nation, live with wildland fire.

Three primary factors:

1. Restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes
2. Creating fire-adapted communities
3. Responding to wildfires

Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this team learning link!
Endnotes


4 **Public Law 107–203.** 107th Congress. (24 July 2002)


7 **U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015.** The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service’s non-fire work. 16 p.


