

Plan for creating a Burned Area Rehabilitation program and the potential effects on other programs and funding levels

Request: Within 90 days of enactment of this Act, the Service is directed to report to the Committees a detailed plan for creating a Burned Area Rehabilitation program, and the potential effects on other programs and funding levels.

Introduction

The Forest Service's burned area rehabilitation needs have outpaced available resources, leaving the Agency unable to rehabilitate lands unlikely to recover naturally, and repair or replace fire-damaged infrastructure in a timely manner. Rehabilitation action generally occurs within three years of a wildland fire. A program with dedicated funding to rehabilitate burned areas would reduce the negative impacts of choosing between rehabilitation of burned areas and other natural resource management priorities.

The Forest Service has not programmatically addressed post-fire rehabilitation needs for many years. There have been some local efforts to cover important post-fire rehabilitation; however, most have gone unfunded. In fiscal year (FY) 2020 and 2021, the Agency allocated \$9.9 million to fund post-fire repair and replacement of minor facilities and infrastructure damaged or destroyed by wildfire, addressing a small portion of the overall rehabilitation needs in the 2020 wildfire season. The Agency has also discussed with Department of the Interior personnel their Burned Area Rehabilitation program to gain insights and recommendations for implementation. This response to the Appropriations Committees' request for the Forest Service to prepare a detailed plan to create a Burned Area Rehabilitation program is informed by their work at the Department of the Interior.

Burned Area Rehabilitation Program Development Process

The Forest Service's Burned Area Rehabilitation program will be developed by a cross-Deputy Area team with members from Fire and Aviation Management, Watershed, Fish, Wildlife, Air, and Rare Plants, Engineering, Forest and Rangeland Management, Lands and Realty Management, and Recreation, Heritage, and Volunteer Resources program areas. Recommendations from the Department of the Interior's Burned Area Rehabilitation program, experiences and lessons learned from the Forest Service's FY 2020 through 2021 post-fire rehabilitation effort, as well as the Forest Service post-fire rehabilitation needs, will be incorporated in developing the program.

Definition and Scope

Rehabilitation, as defined by the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, is action taken within "three years of a wildland fire to repair or improve fire-damaged lands which are unlikely to recover to management-approved conditions; or to repair or replace minor facilities damaged by fire." This would include the actions currently covered in exploratory efforts for minor facilities and infrastructure, as well as invasive species control, habitat restoration, and revegetation. Burned Area Rehabilitation funding would only be used to address post-fire rehabilitation for fires that occurred during that year or the previous year and would not be used to address the back log of post-fire restoration needs.

Impacts on Other Programs

While the Agency does not anticipate any detrimental funding impacts to other Forest Service programs, successful implementation of Burned Area Rehabilitation projects will require staff engagement from several Forest Service program areas, including those mentioned above. The anticipated benefits of the program include timely restoration of lands unlikely to recover naturally and the repair or replacement of fire-damaged infrastructure. A program with dedicated funding to rehabilitate burned areas will eliminate the need for National Forests to decide between funding post-fire rehabilitation or proactive land management actions, such as hazardous fuels mitigation and landscape management priorities.

Transparency and Accountability

Metrics that track spending and accomplishments will be used. A fund code will be established for rehabilitation actions. In addition, projects and accomplishments will be tracked within the appropriate database of record. Clear sideboards will be established to ensure funding is focused on projects of greatest priority. The cross-Deputy Areas team will define acceptable activities and a competitive process to evaluate proposals and prioritize funds. Potential activities under this program could include revegetation, invasive species treatments, repair to campgrounds and trailheads, and reforestation.

Timeframes

The Agency is prepared to establish the Burned Area Rehabilitation program the first year it is funded by an appropriations bill. An annual cycle for project submissions, requirements, and timelines for project proposals will be defined by the cross-Deputy Areas team and widely circulated among Agency information pathways. Initially, funding will be available for rehabilitation actions up to three years post-fire, aligning with the Department of the Interior's program timeframes. The Forest Service may re-evaluate to determine whether this timeframe meets specific needs and conditions for Forest Service priority activities under this program, which may require extended timeframes to complete.

Policy

While most actions will fit within a categorical exclusion for assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act, some projects may require more complex assessments. Additionally, Tribal, National Historic Preservation Act Section 106, and Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultations will likely be needed. Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction will be established to clearly outline program roles and responsibilities.