



The Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition

REVIEWING THE REVIEW (ON PRESCRIBED FIRE)

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TIME TO ACT - IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

On September 8th, 2022, U.S. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore announced an end to the agency's 90-day pause on prescribed burning, coupled with a 107-page report reviewing the Forest Service's prescribed burning program practices. The [National Prescribed Fire Program Review](#) (NPFPR) makes a series of recommendations for how to improve the safety and regularity of prescribed burning, which are summarized in this briefing paper that was originally published in the Fireshed's [Wildfire Wednesday](#) blog.

As we prepare for wildfires shaped by our climate future, we need a range of tools and skills to make our landscapes and communities more resilient and ready. These tools include fire prevention, home hardening, forest thinning, expanded options for forest stewardship such as Forest Councils, **and also prescribed fire and wildfires which are managed for ecological benefit.**

Returning fire to fire-adapted landscapes is a balancing act, one that requires land managers "be clear about the risk of conducting prescribed burning operations as well as the cost of delaying or avoiding treatments." The NPFPR provides guidance for that necessary update to the prescribed burning Modus Operandi.



Instead of creating a culture of risk avoidance, the U.S. Forest Service needs to move forward with clarity about what they can control.

USDA Forest Service U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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National Prescribed Fire Program Review



HOW IS THE FOREST SERVICE RETHINKING ITS APPROACH TO PRESCRIBED FIRE?

Immediate changes to the Forest Service's approach to prescribed burning include:

1. Improved decision-making processes

- Agency administrators will authorize ignitions for the Operational Period (24 hrs) for the day of the burn, instead for a window of time. Moderate and high complexity burns now require that an agency administrator be present on-site.
- Burning at the upper end of the prescription comes with heightened risk and should be avoided.
- As temperatures rise and precipitation patterns shift, conditions for prescribed fire will change. Extreme heat events, along with more severe droughts, will bring less soil moisture, drier fuels, and more potential for undesirable fire behavior. New trainings will include the effects of climate change on fire and fuels, drought, and modeling tools.
- Go/no-go decision-making inflection points will be standardized across the agency for crews making the call on whether or not to proceed with prescribed burns.
- Existing and future burn plans will be reviewed prior to putting fire on the ground and a technical reviewer must re-approve that the plans reflect current conditions and burn complexity.

2. Standardizing practices

- Communication and reporting will be standardized across the agency to ensure consistency and to minimize the chance of miscommunication.
- Briefings, which happen immediately prior to a prescribed burn being lit, will now follow a standard procedure.

3. Investing in technology for improved planning

- The Forest Service aims to incorporate PODS (Potential Operational Delineations) as a modeling tool for both wildfire response and vegetative/fuels management planning.

4. More precise risk analysis

- Fuel conditions on adjacent lands will be considered, as this can reduce a practitioner's ability to control a fire that moves (escapes) beyond the planned burn area.
- More consideration will be given to the impact of long-term drought on prescribed fire behavior since the resulting conditions from drought have been cited as a contributing factor in several reviews of escaped prescribed fires.



In fire-adapted landscapes, prescribed fire creates conditions that reduce the intensity of subsequent wildfires, increase suppression success, and reduce firefighter exposure and risk.

REVIEWING THE REVIEW (ON PRESCRIBED FIRE)

5. More collaboration

- Increase communication and coordination with neighboring landowners .
- The review found that “current agreement policies and contracting laws can keep (USFS districts) from finding the resources they need to carry out complex, large-scale, or long-duration prescribed fires”. One solution to this shortfall is increasing avenues for external partners to implement prescribed fire across boundaries by reducing barriers to collaborative prescribed burning with State agencies and others.

6. Transparency

- Public trust means public transparency, including coordinating with partners and communities and being upfront about why and where prescribed burns are conducted.
- The Forest Service aims to implement a large-scale messaging and education campaign highlighting the importance of prescribed fire, including transparent communication related to risk, uncertainty, and complexity.

These risk-reduction actions will happen concurrently with agency use of congressionally-approved funding and resources to “scale up fuels and forest health treatments - including prescribed fire - in a way that is safe while also recognizing that risks cannot be fully removed from this land management activity.”

The recommendations outlined above could create more administrative hurdles which may make it harder for the agency to implement prescribed fire in New Mexico and across the West. While fire managers and decision makers are reevaluating the risk of prescribed burning and adopting the findings to increase their odds of success, the agency also recognizes that the **“culture will need to change to elevate the priority of prescribed fire and adopt an all-hands approach to using this central tool for fuels reduction and forest resilience.”**



CHANGING THE CULTURE

LONG-TERM INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE THE CULTURE OF PRESCRIBED BURNING

In addition to the immediate recommendations, the Forest Service is pursuing initiatives which will provide better education, training, and improve the culture of the prescribed fire program.



Long-term changes to the Forest Service’s approach to prescribed burning include:

1. **Development of a national strategic plan** for prescribed fire implementation. The plan will include timing and command structure for ignitions and the logistics to prioritize and mobilize resources (crews, equipment, etc.) for both suppression and prescribed burning activities by December 15, 2022.
2. **In collaboration with partners, identification of a strategy for dedicating crews to hazardous fuels work** and mobilizing them across the country to support the highest priority hazardous fuels reduction work by December 15, 2022.
3. **Establishment of a Western Prescribed Fire Training curriculum** by January 1, 2023. This curriculum will be built with the interagency fire and research community, Tribes, and other partners.

“ For the Forest Service to successfully confront the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, agency culture will need to change to elevate the priority of prescribed fire and adopt an all-hands approach to using this central tool for fuels reduction and forest resiliency.

LOCAL IMPACTS HOW THE REPORT’S RECOMMENDATIONS WILL BE FELT ACROSS NEW MEXICO

It is recognized that prescribed fire needs to change, given unprecedented climatic and weather events. Prescribed and cultural burning is also still one of the best tools available to land stewards to reduce the hazard of future catastrophic wildfire. As people across New Mexico, federal and otherwise, commit to active management of the West’s forests, our commitment needs to include returning fire to the landscape and working with the human communities who live there. the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed stand by these and other policy and practice changes that make prescribed burning safer and more effective.

Taking these steps are not just dependent on incorporating lessons learned into future efforts, but on taking an ‘all-hands’ approach to prescribed fire by investing in partnerships across boundaries and organizations. A collaborative approach to burning creates room for diverse perspectives, voices, and ability which serve to widen the lens of both capacity and situational awareness. the Greater Santa Fe Fireshed stand by these and other policy and practice changes that make prescribed burning safer and more effective.

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