

FIRE FAQs

What is ‘Managed Wildfire for Resource Benefit’ and is it actually beneficial?

Legendary forest fires of the late 1800s and early 1900s bolstered the argument that forest fires threatened commercial timber supplies and contributed to the philosophy that fire was a danger that needed to be suppressed. Following the 1910 fire season, the U.S. Forest Service adopted a policy of total fire suppression. By 1935, a 10:00 a.m. rule was created, stating that all wildland fires were to be completely out by 10:00 a.m. the morning after initially reported. In 1968, the National Park Service shifted its policy to recognize fire as an ecological process. The U.S. Forest Service followed in 1974, changing from total fire suppression to a wider variety of fire management tools. This allowed certain fires in some wilderness areas to burn out without active suppression and control. Terms such as “Let Burn”, “Prescribed Natural Fire”, and “Wildland Fire Use” were used very cautiously to achieve resource management objectives with unplanned ignitions (3).

Today, this term is more widely accepted as “Managed Wildfire for Resource Benefit” and serves a much broader application than wilderness areas alone. In 2009, Federal fire policy was implemented across agencies to ensure a consistent application of the “Managed Wildfire for Resource Benefit”. However, local and state jurisdictions are often bound by law to “provide full wildfire suppression due to values at risk, human-caused fires, and protection of private lands (2).”



Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Managing wildfire for resource benefits and ecological purposes refers to a strategic choice to use naturally ignited fires to achieve resource management objectives (2). “Managers actively manage the fire to shape, nudge, and corral the fire to accomplish the ecological and fuel-reduction objectives that have been identified for it, and at the same time protect people, property, and key resources (4).”

A wildland fire initiated by an unplanned ignition is typically suppressed with all available resources, unless the situation negatively affects firefighter safety. Deviating from full suppression requires performing a Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) process guided by resource management objectives. Managed wildfire requires extensive advance planning. “First, the management plan for the National Park or Forest—the publicly reviewed, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliant document that governs

all management activities on federal land—has to permit the managed fire. Then, the fire management plan—the execution document—has to spell out a detailed process for managing a wildfire. Managers face a long go/no-go checklist of considerations: Is it the right season of the year? Is the ignition in the right place on the forest? Are the winds likely to remain favorable? Are there natural barriers like talus slopes that will check the fire? Is the fire likely to burn into territory where it must be suppressed, or to escape the area altogether? Will it send large quantities of smoke into neighboring communities? If it gets out of hand, are there enough firefighters to fight it safely? Can people live with the blaze, the smoke, and the uncertainty for weeks or months, until the fall rains come (4)?”





Credit: McCormick Fire, Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center

Gail Wells (2009) writes in *Wildland Fire Use: Managing for a Fire-Smart Landscape* that “Some of the reasons managers might hesitate to make a “go” decision ... include:

- Constraints within the organizational culture (e.g., a strong bias toward suppression or fear of liability, if a fire escaped, that would cost them their job);
- Political boundaries (e.g., concern that the fire would burn too close to neighboring lands);
- Organizational capacity (e.g., lack of time and resources to plan for the managed wildfire);
- Policy directives (e.g., a blanket suppression order at the regional level);
- Public perceptions (e.g., potential negative reactions to smoke or the risk of damage to private property); (4)”
- Other risks include potential escape, damage to resources and adjacent private property, potential loss of life, and the cost of suppression if a wildfire “blows-up” and then subsequently depletes suppression resources even more.

So, the question remains: **Are managed wildfires for resource benefit actually beneficial?** Under certain circumstances, yes. Managed wildfire has the potential to consume built-up fuels, making the landscape less susceptible to a larger and potentially more severe wildfire later. Managing naturally ignited wildfires also allows land managers to maintain the important role of fire across the landscape while protecting other values at risk—whether they are homes in the wildland urban interface, ecologically important habitats, historically significant cultural sites, or other values (1).

Resources

1. Kwart, M. and M. Warthin. 2010. Working toward a fire-permeable landscape: Managing wildfire for resource benefits in remote, rural, and urban areas of Alaska. *Wildfire Management Today*, 70(1): 41-43.
2. The Science Analysis of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. <https://cohesivefire.nemac.org/option/2> Accessed February 23, 2018.
3. Van Wagtendonk, J.W. 2007. The History and Evolution of Wildland Fire Use. *Fire Ecology Special Issue*, 3(2): 3-17
4. Wells, G. 2009. *Wildland Fire Use: Managing for a Fire-Smart Landscape*. *Fire Science Digest*, Issue 4, January 2009. 12 p.

Case examples of Managed Wildfire for Resource Benefit:

Crater Fire

The 2004 Crater Fire was a good example of a fire managed for resource benefit. “[Fire] successfully burned off surface fuels in the burn area, helping to create a more natural situation for the fuels in the area, and helping to decrease the likelihood of a high-intensity fire in the future.” https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/invo/home/?cid=fsbdev3_003803

Point Fire

The Point Fire started with a lightning strike on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. “We know that there are a lot of acres out there to treat. We will never do it with thinning alone or with prescribed fire alone. Now we are bringing wildfire more into the mix, so it’s another great tool that we’ll have.” *McDaniel, J. 2012. Managing Fire for Multiple Objectives: Blazing the Trail in the Southwest. Southwest Fire Science Consortium, 7p.*

Illilouette Fire

“After a three-year, on-the-ground assessment of the Yosemite National Park’s Illilouette Creek basin, UC Berkeley researchers concluded that a strategy dating to 1973 of managing wildfires with minimal suppression has created a landscape more resistant to catastrophic fire, with more diverse vegetation and forest structure and increased water storage, mostly in the form of meadows in areas cleared by fires.” *Sanders, R. 2016. Wildfire management vs. fire suppression benefits forest and watershed. Berkeley News, date accessed 3/9/18.*

McCormick fire

“Stanislaus Forest fire crews managed the McCormick lightning fire, allowing the wildfire to consume years of accumulated fallen branches, pine needles, dead logs, and other fuels, and steering it away from Clark Fork Road and recreation facilities.” *Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, www.cserc.org, date accessed 3/9/18.*

“Using wildfires as an ecological process will help maintain the character of the landscape while accommodating values and resource use.” *Kwart, M. and M. Warthin. 2010. Working toward a fire-permeable landscape-managing wildfire for resource benefit in remote, rural, and urban areas of Alaska. Forest Management Today, 70(1):40-43.*