

## The Great Basin: Wildland Fire Management in the Year 2000<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: The future of wildland fire management depends on the course chosen by fire managers today. Our responsiveness to issues will determine how much we influence where we go. Economics in concert with a better appreciation of fire's role in ecosystem dynamics will significantly alter fire management as we know it today. Public subsidies of homeowners who refuse to take prudent fire prevention actions will dwindle. Risk management will be clearly understood. We will no longer spend more than a property is worth to protect it. Our work force will change both internally and externally. There will be many opportunities for initiative, creativity, and ingenuity to blossom.

Assumptions are important when we look into the future. For you to understand my perspective, you must know what assumptions I carry into this presentation. My assumptions include:

- We determine the future by setting goals and objectives.
- The future is irrevocably keyed to our performance today.
- All change takes time.
- The next 14 years will pass like 7.

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<sup>1</sup>Presented at the Symposium on Wildland Fire 2000, April 27-30, 1987, South Lake Tahoe, California.

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My comments are by no means meant to be irreverent. I have been an active, willing participant of the past. With this baggage unpacked, we will now build a vision of the future.

Cooperation between fire agencies will intensify. Driven by our own quest for efficiency and tight budgets, we will complete integrated fire management analysis. Duplication of forces will not exist.

No longer will you see engines driving past one another to get to fires. Areas will be designated for initial attack based on fastest response rather than agency jurisdiction.

Structural protection is the one issue that will complicate cooperation more than any other. I don't see the Forest Service changing its long-standing position to avoid entering structures.

Agencies with wildland and structural responsibilities will take the lead in urban/wildland interface areas.

Forces will be highly trained and motivated by professionalism. Much like today, we will be a highly energized workforce.

By the year 2000, we will be approaching racial and gender parity in the Great Basin fire community. Women and minorities will be well represented in all levels of most organizations. This will not come easily. A concerted effort will have actively recruited and nurtured people to succeed in a previously white-male-dominated profession.

Training and technology interchange will be spontaneous. Our desire to provide cutting edge services will overcome the provincial momentum we are so actively working to overcome.

Fire's role in ecosystem dynamics will be thoroughly understood. Management decisions will be based on this expanded awareness. The public will push us toward more responsible fire suppression. Left to our own devices, it will be difficult for us to objectively critique our actions.

Economics will be a paramount decision criterion well before 2000. We can ill afford to spend a million dollars to suppress a fire doing very little resource damage. Suppression costs and damages will be closely monitored. We will be held accountable for gross disparities.

Protection of property will be in perspective. People who choose to live in fire prone environments will have better guidance on prevention methods. They will also have the right to experience the consequences of their decisions. They'll no longer be subsidized by local governments or the American Insurance System. The "Wild Fire Strikes Home Initiative" will be recognized as one of the finest examples of public and private sector cooperation. Most of the issues will be resolved. Zoning and building codes will be established that significantly reduce the potential for structural loss during wildfire intrusions into developed areas.

Green belt management will be recognized as mutually beneficial by developers, fire agencies and private landowners.

The homeowner's responsibility will be clear. When these responsibilities aren't met, fire agencies will not be expected to compensate for the homeowners mistaken assumptions that someone will bail them out.

Satellite detection and monitoring of ignitions will be common-place. Computer aided decisionmaking and dispatch will be well established. Clear, accurate predictions of the emerging fire's impacts will trigger a wide variety of responses.

Real time audio-visual relays will be transmitted from incident sites to command and coordination centers. This information will

facilitate communication and decisionmaking by a diversified group of managers.

Risk management will be well understood. A risk assessment will be a critical element of each prescribed fire and wildfire decision. Managers will be comfortable with strategies thought to be irresponsible today.

We will finally recognize the limited influence mortals have on Mother Nature when she unleashes her spirit. Utilizing significantly less forces, we will accomplish much the same thing we do today without spending the money. Suppression damage and scars will be minimized and our people exposed to less hazards.

Our ability to manage suppression forces will match our total mobility effectiveness. Incidents involving more than 1,000 people will be rare. We will understand where our energies can be effective and where the vagaries of nature will prevail.

The public will no longer equate aggressive fire suppression with large airtankers and a cast of thousands.

Aerial retardants and delivery systems will be radically different. Foams and yet unidentified substances will be placed with pinpoint accuracy by large helicopters and single engine aircraft.

Successful initial attack and first reinforcements will be provided with aerial ignition devices. Fire will be fought with fire again.

In many instances a small crew supported by aerial ignition equipment will handle fires normally relegated to large incident management [sic] teams. Our ability to determine inevitable final fire size will encourage us to get on with burnout to rational natural barriers.

Use of the confinement strategy outside wilderness will be socially and politically acceptable. No longer will we as fire managers calibrate our success based on minimum acres burned. Costs and damages will be our measure of success.

Contracting with the private sector for fire management services will be a growth industry. Public fire managers will be contract inspectors and specification writers.

The renaissance of fire effects awareness will trigger a quantum expansion of the prescribed fire program to 500,000 acres a year on National Forests in the Great Basin alone.

Range conservationists, wildlife biologists, and silviculturists will advocate using prescribed fire to enhance the vegetation they manage.

State game officials, ranchers, and the various preservation organizations will form an unusual coalition to encourage us to utilize fire to meet their goals.

After many skirmishes, the air quality issue will be resolved. Fire will replace pesticides and machines as the tool of choice in vegetation manipulation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This may seem like a conservative manifesto. I urge you to consider our progress in implementing what, for the Forest Service, was an expansive revision of fire policy in 1978. The "10-acre/10 a.m." policy was replaced with latitude to adjust suppression activity to minimize the sum of fire-fighting costs plus damages. Today, 9 years later, we are on the threshold of embracing that concept. We are yet to understand the implications of such freedom.

We will in effect learn to peacefully coexist with one of the dynamic forces that shaped so much of what we value today.

Fire specialists will be sought after for their management skills and land ethic. The keys to achieving this future include:

Professionalism--Not being afraid to make mistakes when actions are based on "state-of-the-art" methods and sound application.

Outreach--Fire management practitioners need to see themselves as active participants in the social/political arena. We should expect scrutiny and relish the opportunity to interact with the public.

Strong Land Ethic--We must never lose sight of our foundation rooted in practices that begin with the question "What is best for the land?"