



Increasing the Use of Planned and Unplanned Ignitions

Prescribed fire on the Flathead National Forest, part of the Southwestern Crown of the Continent Project. USDA Forest Service photo.

By Hutch Brown

This issue of *Fire Management Today* focuses on the future of wildland fire management in the United States. Forest Service staff and partners offer their perspectives on how land managers will successfully manage wildland fire in the coming years. The issue closes with a guest article by author Stephen Pyne, who suggests that “the sum of anthropogenic fire practices” has replaced the Pleistocene Epoch of ice with an epoch of fire.

For the past 20 to 30 years, a wildfire crisis has been building in the West as wildfires have grown in size, duration, and destructivity despite highly effective suppression responses by the USDA Forest Service and others in the wildland fire community. In response, Federal land managers have carried out fuels and forest health treatments on a rising scale, yet treatment levels have not kept pace with the rising scale of wildfire risk (Ager and others 2021a). Recognizing the mismatch,

Forest Service scientists devised a national Fireshed Registry to model the way that ignitions burn across broad landscapes and expose homes and other buildings to wildfire (Ager and others 2021b).

CONFRONTING THE WILDFIRE CRISIS

In January 2022, based on the Fireshed Registry and other cutting-edge tools and technologies (Ager and others 2021c), Forest Service Chief Randy Moore joined Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack in releasing the Wildfire Crisis Strategy to reduce wildfire risk (see the article in this issue describing the strategy). The strategy articulated the need for a new land management paradigm: stepping up the pace and scale of fuels and forest health treatments to match the scale of wildfire risk across western landscapes.

On badly overgrown forested landscapes across the West, part of the solution is

to restore a semblance of the original fire-adapted landscape in three steps:

1. Using mechanical means to reduce the forest to something approaching historical stocking levels;
2. Using prescribed fire to further reduce fuels (such as through pile burns) and to reintroduce fire effects into the system; and
3. Using planned and unplanned ignitions, repeated at suitable intervals over time, to re-create a patchy fire-adapted landscape.

In the past, Congress has funded the corresponding fuels and forest health treatments on the national forests and grasslands through annual appropriations alone. In fiscal

Hutch Brown is the former editor of Fire Management Today and a program specialist (retired) for the Forest Service's Office of Communication, Washington Office, Washington, DC.

year 2020, for example, the actual appropriation for the hazardous fuels budget line item, according to the Forest Service's [latest budget justification](#), was about \$445 million. However, research suggests that far greater areas need to be treated just to keep pace with rising wildfire risk (Ager and others 2021b, 2021c).

NEW FUNDING SOURCES

In November 2021, Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, better known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The legislation invested about \$5.5 billion in natural-resources-related infrastructure, including a 5-year investment of about \$3 billion in restoring ecosystems and reducing wildfire risk. The Forest Service worked with Tribes and partners to select [10 landscapes for initial investments](#) using funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. In April 2022, the Forest Service announced that the 10 western landscapes would receive an initial investment of \$131 million in fiscal year 2022. In late 2022, the Forest Service released an [update showing progress](#) made in the initial 10 project areas.

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In August 2022, President Joe Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act into law. The act made \$5 billion in additional funding available to the Forest Service over 10 years, including \$2 billion for fuels and vegetation treatments on the national forests and grasslands. In late 2022, the Forest Service selected an additional 11 western landscapes for fuels and forest health treatments through funding under the Inflation Reduction Act. Through both sets of new legislation, Congress has increased funding for fuels and forest health treatments in firesheds and high-risk areas across the West.

REINTRODUCING FIRE INTO FIRE-ADAPTED LANDSCAPES

Now it's time to deliver. Implementation of the Wildfire

Crisis Strategy hinges on safely and effectively reintroducing wildland fire into fire-adapted landscapes at scale. To succeed, land managers must be able to operate within a cultural and institutional framework that is conducive to the use of wildland fire at the scale of large landscapes across the West. The articles in this issue focusing on the use of planned and unplanned ignitions show what needs to be done.

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