

Fire Position Statement

December 12, 2022

Mission Statement

The Ravalli County Collaborative (RCC) is a diverse group of volunteers appointed by the BCC (Board of Ravalli County Commissioners) to promote the wise use and management of public natural resources by local, state, and federal agencies within Ravalli County. The RCC employs a collaborative forum for reviewing and developing natural resource actions and policies that affect local communities.

The following is a consensus product of the RCC. It summarizes agreement among its members for the purpose of promoting appropriate management of forest resources in Ravalli County Montana.

The Bitterroot Valley has 300,920 priority area acres identified by the Montana Forest Action Plan and 5 of the top 10 Firesheds facing the most wildfire risk in Montana. . . This threat - combined with unprecedented growth and new home construction that extends to the boundary of the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) - highlights why we need action across all ownerships.

Fire Adapted Bitterroot Joint Chief's project FY22

Vision and Values:

We acknowledge that naturally occurring wildfires, as well as prescribed burns, are an important part of renewing degraded forest ecosystems and we support the wise, adaptive management practices associated with returning our forests to fire-dependent and fire-adapted landscapes.

Management of our forest, including mechanical thinning, fuel reduction and prescribed burning, is used to

- 1) reduce the extent of damages caused to our natural resources by catastrophic wildfire
- 2) increase the effectiveness of suppression actions;
- 3) improve forest health, wildlife habitat, and ecosystem function and
- 4) reduce the risk to fire fighters and private landowners in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) through integrated cross boundary project planning and implementation.

Active forest management is urgent in and around the WUI to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire to private and public lands and to allow for the use of fire as a management tool.

Description:

We live in seasonally dry, fire-prone forests that have evolved with and are dependent on fire to maintain and improve forest health and function. Fire is both inevitable and necessary to sustain and perpetuate these fire adapted ecosystems.

Historically, our forests were subject to more frequent, less intense wildfires ignited by lightning and indigenous people. The result was that forest fuels were burned more often. Some smaller trees and shrubs were killed by wildfires which allowed other trees to reach old age. The forest therefore consisted of patches of thick, thin, young, old, open and more diverse habitats.

Fire impacts coniferous forests in differing ways dependent on the species of conifers present. Lodgepole Pine benefit from periodic stand replacing wildfires which typically occurred with many years in between. In Ponderosa Pine stands, historic wildfires were much more frequent and often burned only the forest understory.

Key to diverse and abundant forest wildlife is a complex of plants of varying ages, heights and species. Wildfire historically contributed to such forest complexity. As forest stands regenerate, so do wildlife habitats.

For many decades, there has been an enormous effort in the United States to suppress all forest wildfires as quickly as possible.

Thick stands of conifers can result in more competition for resources; more vulnerability to drought and diseases; and in less water flowing downslope to meadows and aquatic ecosystems.

Fire behavior has changed and damage from wildfire is increasing, requiring administrators to identify and implement new strategies to reduce risks to communities and ecosystems.

Wildfire seasons are longer, hotter, and drier, increasing the vulnerability of fire-excluded forests and embedded ecosystems.

Unnaturally large and intense wildfires may kill valuable plants and trees, sterilize soils, and result in extensive soil erosion. When forest soils are lost, ecosystem productivity is often lost for hundreds or thousands of years.

Forest and fuel reduction treatments can be effective at lowering fire severity, but will not necessarily prevent wildfires from starting and/or spreading. Areas with reduced fuel loads can give firefighters a chance to stop or slow a wildfire's progress that threatens private property and human safety. They assist firefighter's ability to control the spread of fire.

Where is this topic applicable?

Wildfire knows no boundaries and the risk of sustaining unacceptable damages from catastrophic wildfires extends from the National Forest to well beyond the National Forest Boundary, especially within the WUI.

Management Recommendations:

Forest management, including returning fire safely to the landscape where applicable, is required to perpetuate many western forests.

Planning

- Wildfire preparedness and planning to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire requires coordinated and integrated actions between private landowners, Fire Districts, County, State, and Federal governments. A current updated Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is vital to identify priority management and funding needs.
- Careful consideration, planning, and prioritizing is required to strategically implement forest fuel treatments given the enormity of the current condition of our forests, potential effects of a changing climate and very limited funding.
- Consider transportation management in the WUI to enhance wildfire suppression, access and landowner safety.
- The Montana Forest Action Plan is a valuable tool to identify priority areas for forest management.

Forest and Fire Management

- Use all available management tools to help minimize the risks to human life and property and enhance fire fighter safety within the WUI. Limit high severity wildfires outside the range of natural variability to protect rare habitats and existing old growth stands, and restore the role of frequent low- to moderate- intensity fires in fire-dependent ecosystems.
 - Changing climate conditions will inevitably change our western forests in ways yet discovered. Therefore, managing our forests will require a considerable adaptive management approach intended to increase forest resilience and allow room for forest ecosystems to evolve with changing conditions. All treatments will require thorough and well-funded monitoring plans.
 - Mechanical thinning and periodic prescribed burning are the principal tools available to reduce forest fuels to restore historic fire regimes and stimulate healthy ecosystems.
 - Use prescribed fire and mechanical thinning to reduce fuel loads in and adjacent to old growth stands where appropriate.
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- Promote a diverse mosaic within the ecosystem.

Risk to Private Lands in the WUI:

- In overstocked forested communities within and adjacent to the WUI, use mechanical thinning followed by prescribed burning to reduce fuel loads. These treatments will be needed regularly to maintain fire resilient, fire adapted forests and communities.
- In some wildlands, well beyond the WUI, allowing wildfires to burn naturally may be an appropriate response. Considerations may include tree species/forest types, old growth, fuel density, and protection of backcountry infrastructure.
- While forest thinning and prescribed burning may help restore forest ecosystems and aid in wildfire suppression, forest management projects in the WUI alone may not be sufficient to reduce high intensity, high severity wildfires and prevent damage to private property.
- Private landowners should consider fuels mitigation and maintain defensible spaces within their home ignition zones.

Post Wildfire Response:

- Focus on restoring or maintaining site potential and providing optimal wildlife habitat.
- Managers should carefully consider the burned site potential to regenerate naturally. The loss of some forest stands is not always harmful as open areas and meadows may follow. Wildlife species and abundance naturally changes as their habitats change. A diverse and mosaic landscape of forest types and associated ecosystems can strengthen wildlife populations and improve ecosystem function and diversity.

Definitions

- Wildfire: unplanned ignition (human or natural)
 - Prescribed fire: planned ignition
 - Fire: includes both wildfire and prescribed fire with positive or negative results
 - Wildland Urban Interface (WUI): For the purpose of this position statement, the WUI is the area including land on both sides of the National Forest boundary where homes built on private property may be at risk of damage from wildfires that ignite and burn on either side of the public/private boundary line.
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