

# **POSITION STATEMENT OF NAFSR ON FOREST HEALTH AND THE NEED FOR RESTORATION**

National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR)

## **ISSUE**

For more than a century, through grazing, early logging and forest fire protection efforts; wildfire on National Forest lands has been suppressed in many areas of some forest types, like Ponderosa Pine, that are naturally adapted to periodic low intensity wildfires. We now know from science and experience these activities have had some unintended and undesirable consequences, including altered tree species composition and increased density of trees per acre. This increased stand density, or overstocking, increases fire hazard in most forest types. Because of lack of vigor, dense forests are highly susceptible to insects and diseases and, consequently, increased tree mortality. Excess tree density as well as mortality increases fuel loading, resulting in hazardous forest fire conditions that can put watersheds, wildlife habitat, and other forest values at risk. These conditions also increase fire suppression costs and make wildfire control more dangerous and difficult. Unnatural fires resulting from extremely dense stands create artificial and unnatural conditions for soil erosion, flooding, plant invasion, type conversion and altered view sheds. The dominant factor affecting forest fires, health, and vigor is stand density.

For nearly four decades, national forest managers have recognized the fact that overcrowded forests are not sustainable without some form of treatment. The public as well has seen vast areas succumb to insects, disease and wildfire.

## **BASIS AND JUSTIFICATION FOR ACTION**

Although there is no universal definition of Restoration, it implies that the land or ecology needs to be “restored” to some prior level. The difficulty with that thinking is that historical patterns or levels might not be the most desirable and instead what we should be defining is how or what we would want in order to have the ecosystem be in its most desirable form to provide a wide variety of benefits over the long term. Defining treatments during restoration that increases biodiversity, lead to more natural functioning ecosystems, and that promote resilience should be the goal. This can be a more positive, and most importantly, a measurable way of describing what needs to happen; but at a much more rapid pace and a much greater magnitude than what is being accomplished now. Presently, it is abundantly clear that many acres in the West and especially the Rocky Mountains are not at a phase that fits the description above.

It is obvious that the treatment needs are significant and the following information is needed to understand the magnitude of the problem:

1. Current rates of treatments in acres designed to restore resilience over the past 20 years.
2. Acres of treatment needed to significantly reduce the impact on recreation, watershed health, wildlife, soil stability and safety.

Fires in the western ecosystems are problematic with uncharacteristic fire becoming more destructive and costly. There is a huge increase in woody biomass in almost every forest ecosystem. This biomass has contributed to a serious decline in herbaceous vegetation in the forest understory. Some environmental concerns are misguided and lead to inaction or wrong action.

### **NAFSR BELIEFS AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

- Fire alone is **not** the answer. Fire control should be more aggressive while prescribed fire use should also be increased and appropriately managed.
- Congress needs to provide adequate funding to accomplish the large acreages required and remove barriers that lead to “fire borrowing”.
- Meeting duplicative environmental regulations and fixing the repetitive objections and litigation problem continues to cause delays and increased costs. Congress and the Administration need to work to solve and streamline this process in order to keep costs at an appropriate level.
- Removal of excess biomass is critical for returning fire without detrimental effects; trying to return natural fire to ecosystems with un-natural fuel loads is folly.
- Commercial thinning, prescribed fire and logging can all be used to reduce the fuel loading.
- Protecting communities is a high priority that cannot be accomplished without consideration of the value and condition of the forest far removed from the community.
- Forest ecosystems must be brought more in line with the sustainable stocking levels, in many cases similar to those that were present before European settlement. This would bring total biodiversity in line with more natural condition and function. Appropriate tree density and openings to allow for natural levels of herbaceous understory must be provided.
- Appropriate scaled forest industries should be encouraged to utilize and sequester the products from thinning and harvest.
- Do not restrict action to any particular size or age of material. Look at current make-up and focus on remaining conditions and provision of the missing components.
- Prepare the forests for the inevitable periods of drought. Encourage research into climate/forest health relationships.
- Have forest products help pay for forest health measures, but realize they will not always provide sufficient funds so Congressional appropriations are also needed
- The Forest Service has not been in the mode to accomplish the large acreages that need to be dealt with, therefore a concerted effort needs to be made to bring on personnel and provide training needed to be able to plan and carry out the immense task ahead.

## CONCLUSIONS

The land management agency must act **now** to avoid increasing fire (and other) damage from out-of- balance ecosystems.

Planning and treatment must be at a scale of hundreds of thousands of acres over the next ½ century.

Utilization of forest products is a large part of the solution.

It is **NOT** just about fire nor just about trees nor just about owls nor just about..., it is about the total forest and the way it functions. It **IS** about grasses, butterflies, openings, wildlife, water, beauty, diversity, sustainability, products, fire, trees and owls.

NAFSR wants to do all we can to ensure that this growing and continuing issue of deteriorated forest conditions is recognized as one of the most significant issues facing the agency and the sustainability of our nation's forests.

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