

Catastrophic Wildfires

Catastrophic wildfires emit vast amounts of greenhouse gases (GHGs). Studies show that up to 100 tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) per acre can be released. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that 562.3 million metric tons of carbon (approximately 2 ¾ times the yearly emissions of all the passenger vehicles in the United States) were released by forest fires between 2000 and 2005. Catastrophic wildfires also devastate wildlife habitat, damage municipal watersheds and threaten human life and property. For threatened and endangered species and old growth trees catastrophic wildfire is often the number one threat to survival.

Although moderate to low intensity wildfires can be an important part of maintaining natural ecosystems, past fire exclusion practices have led to more frequent, unnaturally hot wildfires. Many public forests are overstocked and unhealthy, due largely to a lack of active management. A recent study of the national forests in Eastern Washington shows that those forests, left unmanaged, will actually become net emitters of CO₂ and that the forests would likely burn at a rate of 1.7% per year—meaning the entire forest could burn in just over 50 years. California forests are currently burning up at a rate of about 0.64% per year and that number is expected to increase by up to 55% by the end of the century, due to warming temperatures and reduced snowpack. Such conditions are common throughout the West, particularly on our public lands. These forests desperately need thinning treatments to remove trees and woody debris that serve as fuel for catastrophic forest fires.

It is possible to get ahead of this problem through active management of unhealthy and overstocked forests. Once forests are thinned, remaining trees and seedlings become healthier and more vibrant, enabling them to grow larger and store more carbon. Studies demonstrate that active management of forests can lead to at least a 50-60% reduction in wildfires.

Mechanical thinning is needed to treat tens of millions of acres that are highly susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. These stands are referred to as Condition Class II (at moderate risk to wildfire and moderate departure from natural fire regime) and Condition Class III (high risk to wildfire and high risk of losing key ecosystems). Because of the focus placed on the quantity of acres treated, the Forest Service has accomplished most of its fuels reduction goals using prescribed fires for areas at lower risk to catastrophic wildfires. The focus of fuel reductions must be shifted to Condition Class II and III *forested* areas that are at highest risk to catastrophic wildfires. This approach would maximize benefits such as reduced emissions from wildfires, increased local employment and reduced risk to adjacent land and property.

In 2003, Congress passed the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) with broad bi-partisan support to give land managers additional tools to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire on public lands. Since its passage, HFRA has been underutilized by the Forest Service. From fiscal year 2005 through fiscal year 2007, only 295,000 acres of the 20 million acres that were authorized in the Act were treated using HFRA authorities. This is a waste of a valuable land management policy tool.

Recommendations:

- 1) The Forest Service should be directed to develop additional guidance to the field to aggressively pursue mechanical treatments in high risk forested areas. Budget strategies must be developed which support increased mechanical treatments.
- 2) The Forest Service should be directed to prioritize use of Healthy Forest Restoration Act authorities. If changes are required to the law to ensure greater use, Congress should move swiftly to enact those.

The American Forest Resource Association (AFRC), headquartered in Portland, Oregon, represents nearly 80 forest products businesses and forest landowners in twelve states, primarily in Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho and Montana. Its mission is to create a favorable operating environment for the forest products industry, ensure a reliable timber supply from public and private lands, and promote sustainable management of forests by improving federal laws, regulations, policies and decisions that determine or influence the management of all lands. For information, call 503-222-9505.

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