

**Western Governors' Association
Policy Resolution 09-7**

Improving the Health of Western Forests and Rangelands

A. BACKGROUND

1. The West is home to the majority of the National Forests and public lands. These and other state, tribal, and private lands have historically provided great wealth to this nation through the forest and range products produced from them. Other diverse values are now recognized and the lands are increasingly being managed for these values, such as water quality, terrestrial and aquatic habitat, and recreational opportunities. Yet millions of acres of forest and rangeland ecosystems are in poor ecological health and at an unacceptable risk of wildfire, insects and disease, and invasive species. These conditions are exacerbated by the drought conditions that continue to affect much of the West. Higher spring and summer temperatures and earlier snowmelt are extending the wildfire season and increasing the intensity of wildfires in the western United States.
2. The increase in wildfires adds carbon emissions to our atmosphere, accelerate the buildup of greenhouse gases, and contribute to global warming.
3. Extensive scientific studies have concluded that the elimination of fire from many of these ecosystems, as well as effects of climate change have led to the decline in forest and range health. These same studies recommend that active management be used to restore the health of these ecosystems by recreating the historical mosaic of plant communities to improve the resource conditions and reduce overall stand density. Prescribed fire; restoration; road maintenance; noxious weed and invasive species treatments; and thinning are all tools that can improve the health of forest and range ecosystems. This type of active management can provide significant benefits to ecosystem function, while protecting and promoting development of old growth forests and large trees without threatening important environmental values.
4. In some parts of the West, the forest products industry can facilitate restoration work. To the extent that active management provides commercial forest products, time is of the essence to capture economic value from these treatments and to reduce risk of catastrophic losses in the future. There will also be a significant amount of small diameter material that will be generated from forest and range health treatments. These materials are becoming an increasingly important source of energy for electricity and fuels, while also providing economic development opportunities for rural communities.
5. Consistent with the Enlibra principles and the Criterion and Indicators of the Montreal Process for sustainable environmental and natural resource management, the Western Governors reached agreement with the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture and a number of diverse stakeholders in August 2001 and in May 2002 on a 10-year, locally driven strategy and implementation plan entitled "A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment" (together "the 10-

Year Strategy”). The 10-Year Strategy established four goals to protect the public and improve the health of forest and rangeland ecosystems: Improve Fire Prevention and Suppression; Reduce Hazardous Fuels; Restore Fire Adapted Ecosystems; and, Promote Community Assistance. The federally led Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) was established in part to oversee implementation of the 10-Year Strategy. These efforts have led to greater coordination of fire and forest health activities.

6. For many years, Western states have experienced intensive wildfire activity. During this time, the Forest Service has exhausted the Congressional Appropriations for fire fighting, resulting in the agency having to “borrow” from other program areas to pay the costs of wildland fire suppression. Congress has not always acted to fully restore these funds through supplemental appropriations, and the Forest Service has not been able to fully implement proactive prevention education, restoration, and fuel reduction plans as a result.
7. Western public lands agencies require an educated and skilled workforce to address their staffing shortages and meet the growing stewardship demands. Currently, the number of youth who are not in school, do not have a diploma, and are not working are increasing. In this coming decade, young adults searching for jobs and training opportunities will increase, and the skill levels required for jobs in the natural resources fields will be higher than in the past. By engaging young people in land stewardship and disaster response activities in partnership with local, state, and federal agencies, we can help western states address environmental challenges. In order to secure a workforce for the future in the natural resource environment, we must support programs which provide youth with access to high quality alternative education and job training. We must also support programs which increase job readiness, civic engagement, environmental efficacy, self esteem and social confidence.

B. GOVERNORS’ POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors ask the Administration to request and the Congress provide funding to fully implement the 10-Year Strategy, while ensuring that proactive fuels reduction funds are not sacrificed in years of high suppression costs.
2. The Governors believe it is important to coordinate restoration efforts with the federal and state regulatory agencies when there are consultation requirements under the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act or the Clean Air Act, or other concerns about complying with environmental laws. Currently, limited staff and funding within state agencies and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries can delay important coordination and consultation and slow restoration work. The Governors support adequate focus on these programs to ensure efficient and timely implementation.
3. Western Governors believe that there is potential to generate new markets in the forest products and energy industry to utilize the small-diameter material removed from the land in the course of forest health treatments. The federal, state, and local governments are urged to fund and promote opportunities with communities, which support and

develop critical infrastructure needed to sustain the forest industry and rural communities. The National Biomass State and Regional Partnership is one means of advancing the use of forest health residues and the Governors urge the Congress to reestablish funding for this important enterprise and to provide for continued funding in support of collaboratively established stewardship contracts. Western Governors encourage the development of forest management practices that promote the use of wood for the production of bioenergy.

4. Native seed and plant materials used for burned area rehabilitation should be acquired which is genetically similar to the pre-disturbed community, if it is economically reasonable, and can be acquired within a reasonable period of time. Non-local native seed and plants may be the most efficient and cost-effective to use in order to expedite restoration and meet the goals of rehabilitation.
5. Western Governors support effective workforce development programs for young people and the need to meet the ongoing demands for disaster recovery assistance and natural resource management staff.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. WGA will support the full implementation of the 10-Year Strategy and will provide a status report on a regular basis to the Governors.
2. WGA will continue to support the Forest Health Advisory Committee regarding implementation of WGA policy and the 10-Year Strategy. WGA will continue to fill a western governors' seat on the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) and other committees, which work toward meeting mutual WGA policy objectives.
3. WGA will support the development of a national framework to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and the coordination of wildland fire and forest health funding and mitigation efforts.
4. WGA is authorized to seek funding from the Administration to assist it with the implementation of this resolution and the 10-Year Strategy.
5. WGA will post this resolution to its web site to be used and referred to as necessary.