



## Western Governors' Association Policy Resolution 13-03

### *Wildland Fire Management and Resilient Landscapes*

#### **A. BACKGROUND**

1. The health of the nation's federal forests and range lands has deteriorated due to a reduction in active management, past federal fire suppression policies, and changing climate conditions. Overgrowth and crowding in forests has allowed damaging insects and diseases to flourish. Many of our range lands are infested with "cheat grass" or other invasive species. The result has been a significant increase in the average acreage burned, higher fire suppression costs, increased impacts on public health, catastrophic damage to the environment and more communities threatened by wildfires every year.
2. Active management, such as range habitat restoration projects, improved livestock grazing practices, thinning, prescribed fire, and road maintenance, has been used successfully to 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 healthy, resilient landscapes. However, complex analysis processes and legal challenges on federal lands have hampered efforts to increase active forest and range management sufficient to make a measureable difference on a landscape scale.
3. State aviation resources (both fixed and rotary-wing) are an integral part of wildfire suppression programs nationwide. Large fixed-wing air tankers play an important role in firefighting, as well. However, availability of federal air tankers has been significantly reduced due to the age and airworthiness of the existing air tanker fleet. The shortage of federal air tankers has put an increasing stress on state air tanker resources. An overarching problem is inaction on approving and funding a national wildfire aviation strategy. This strategy developed by federal and state wildfire management agencies identifies nationally-shared aerial resource needs. It is overdue to be updated and implemented.
4. In severe wildfire seasons, the U.S. Forest Service has "borrowed" from other program areas, such as community assistance and hazardous fuels reduction, to pay the costs of wildland fire suppression. In 2009, Congress passed the Federal Land Assistance and Management Enhancement Act (FLAME Act) which established a split fund to cover U.S. Forest Service and DOI wildland fire suppression costs.
5. The FLAME Act also directed the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture, acting jointly, to develop a new National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (CS). Phase I of the CS established three goals: Creating resilient

landscapes, fire adapted communities, and more effective response to wildfire. Under Phase 3 of the CS, regional science-based risk analysis reports and regional action plans have been completed. These documents and work in other regions will inform the new national strategy, which is expected to be completed early 2014.

6. When developing the CS, policy barriers and process complexities were identified which affect the ability to effectively and efficiently share resources, not only for wildfire, but for work on hazardous fuels and prescribed fire activities. The U.S. Forest Service role in state-state billing procedures is one of these complex processes and the federal authority to continue to perform this role is unclear. The USDA Forest Service provides initial payment for state resources responding to another state's wildfire incident and provides assistance for out of state resource mobilization tracking. By initially compensating states for mobilized resources and seeking subsequent reimbursement from states receiving outside assistance, the USDA Forest Service plays an essential role in facilitating rapid and efficient response to wildland fires.
7. The use of "Good Neighbor Authority" was approved by Congress in 2009 for projects in Colorado and Utah. The Authority enables state agencies to act as an agent for the federal agency to complete similar or complementary forest and land management activities across state, federal and private landowner boundaries. The Authority has not been widely used due to problematic contracting requirements. The Authority expires in September 2013.
8. The use of "Stewardship Contracting Authority" (SCA) was approved by Congress in 2003 to allow forest products to be exchanged for services rendered to restore forest function and health, improve wildlife habitat, or make improvements to recreational or other federal facilities. Where it has been used, SCA has been a valuable tool to restore forest health and wildlife habitat across the west. Stewardship Contracting Authority expires in September 2013, and reauthorization of SCA was proposed in the 2012 Farm Bill.

**B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT**

1. Western Governors call on Congress and the Administration to fully implement the FLAME Act, to accomplish the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and to implement the regional action plans, accepted by the Wildland Fire Executive Council, for each of the Cohesive Strategy regions.
2. Western Governors call on Congress to authorize active management and forest health improvement on federal forest lands. Western Governors call on Congress to enact legislation designed to reinforce the role and effectiveness of collaboration in implementing projects on federal forest lands, and to reduce administrative and preparation processes, costs, and legal challenges to science-based collaborative projects.

3. Western Governors support increased capacity and coordination of state, federal and private aerial resources to respond to wildland fire. The Governors support an immediate revision and implementation of the National Interagency Aviation Management Strategy.
4. Western Governors encourage expedited and coordinated consultation of requirements by federal and state agencies to address Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and other environmental laws to ensure timely review and approval of needed forest restoration and active management on affected forest landscapes.
5. Western Governors support identification and correction of policy barriers that prevent the effective sharing of resources for wildland fire and land management activities.
6. Western Governors support reauthorization of the Good Neighbor Authority; improving the Authority based upon the experience on using it on the ground in Colorado and Utah; and broadening the use of the Authority's provisions to other states where local interest and support exists.
7. Western Governors support reauthorization of Stewardship Contracting Authority to enable federal agencies to more effectively implement forest health improvement projects on a landscape scale.

**C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE**

1. The Governors direct the WGA staff, where appropriate, to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction and the Executive Branch to achieve the objectives of this resolution including funding, subject to the appropriation process, based on a prioritization of needs.
2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to develop, as appropriate and timely, detailed annual work plans to advance the policy positions and goals contained in this resolution. Those work plans shall be presented to, and approved by, Western Governors prior to implementation. WGA staff shall keep the Governors informed, on a regular basis, of their progress in implementing approved annual work plans.