

Western Governors' Association
Policy Resolution 06-9

June 13, 2005
Sedona, Arizona

Improving Forest and Rangeland Health in the West

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 have been impacting much of the West.
2. Extensive scientific studies have concluded that the elimination of fire from many of these ecosystems, as well as past management activities, 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; riparian restoration; road maintenance; noxious weed 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 trees and large trees without threatening important environmental values, and can provide forest products from the treatments to support the economies of local communities. Opportunities exist to treat ecosystems with relatively little site disturbance using low impact equipment, as well as focusing on already disturbed and altered ecosystems needing attention.
3. Comprehensive, scientific analysis such as watershed assessments, and collaborative planning such as Community Wildfire Protection Plans, help identify the appropriate treatments and active management level. These are also useful for strategically focusing scarce human and financial resources. A full range of resource objectives, adhering to existing laws and regulatory requirements, should be considered to prevent duplication and to coordinate with those activities that are being implemented under other authorities. Monitoring and evaluation of effects of treatments on the ground are necessary components of any efforts that seek to ensure the best long-term and science-based results for the resource.
4. In some parts of the West, the forest products industry provides an important piece of the infrastructure to facilitate getting restoration work done. 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, non-commercial material that will be generated from forest and range health treatments and that is expensive to remove. These materials are becoming an increasingly important source of energy for electricity and fuels while also providing economic development opportunities for rural communities.

5. In some states, school funding depends on receipts from timber harvest. Yet, in recent years and for a variety of reasons, these receipts have plummeted. Despite Congressional legislation that provides supplemental county payments for schools and county finances in rural timber-dependent communities, there is still a dramatic decrease from previous receipts for many western communities. For many rural communities, restoring the health of forest ecosystems has significant implications for funding children's schools through educational endowments trusts on or direct payments from public lands.
6. Consistent with the Enlibra principles for 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.
7. The federally led Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) was established in part to oversee implementation of the 10-Year Strategy and its efforts have led to greater coordination of fire and forest health activities between the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture. Western governors are currently working closely with the federal agencies through WFLC and the Western Governors' Association (WGA) Forest Health Advisory Committee to update the 10-Year Strategy. An update to the 10-Year Strategy was called for by the Advisory Committee in their report adopted by the Governors in November 2004.
8. State and Private Forestry (S&PF) in the U.S. Forest Service budget is the primary source of federal funding for forest and fire management on non-federal lands. Since forest health and wildfire management issues do not respect ownership boundaries, programs included in the S&PF umbrella help foresters reach across those lines and better work at a landscape scale. The 10-Year Strategy recognizes the importance of collaborating on forest health projects between state and federal agencies, plus adjacent landowners.
9. In years of intensive wildfire activity, the Forest Service 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 fuel reduction plans as a result. Restoration and community assistance efforts recommended in the 10-Year Strategy have also been severely under funded.

B. GOVERNORS' POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors are committed to completing a collaborative update of the 10-Year Strategy with the assistance and support of the WGA Forest Health Advisory Committee. Western Governors believe that by implementing the 10-Year Strategy in the locally driven collaborative manner set forth therein, the nation can restore the health of our forests, rangelands, riparian systems and watersheds, provide assistance to local communities, and significantly reduce the risk posed by wildland fire.
2. Western Governors are committed to working with their partners to accelerate restoration of unhealthy forests, rangelands, and watersheds at the community and landscape level, as described in the 10-Year Strategy. The Congress and the Administration must also continue to recognize that effective use of the collaborative process can help expedite necessary fuel treatments across the millions of acres of lands at risk in the West and nationwide.
3. The 10-Year Strategy and Community Wildfire Protection Plans should be used to select fuel reduction projects and set priorities at the national, state and local level. Federal land managers, in conjunction with State Foresters, tribes, local officials and stakeholders should have authority and flexibility to identify areas needing treatment while bringing together the widest range of landowners to accomplish forest restoration on the needed scale. Priority in project selection should be given to projects that reduce fire risk in communities at risk and the watersheds that supply them.
4. The active management and restoration treatments called for in the 10-Year Strategy will require substantial investment by all levels of government and private citizens if the agreed-to goals are to be achieved. The Administration should request and the Congress should 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. By using proactive approaches to reduce hazardous fuel, to restore ecosystems and to increase the capacity of our communities to assist, this nation can eventually reduce loss of life and property from wildfire catastrophes while lowering the tremendous suppression costs that are incurred. In addition, complete funding for the Forest Service's S&PF budget is a vital part of allowing State Foresters to work across landscape boundaries to maximize forest health treatments efforts. Finally, Western Governors fully support implementation of the recommendations of the WGA-Chaired Strategic Panel for Fire Suppression Costs and believe they can eventually lead to additional control over wildfire suppression costs.
5. The Governors note the importance of coordinating the 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.

6. Western Governors believe that there is potential to generate new markets in the forest products industry and the energy industry to utilize the small-diameter material removed from the land in the course of forest health treatments. The federal government is urged to fund and promote opportunities with communities and governments to develop demonstration projects and educational opportunities that aid in the market development for the use of non- traditional forest products. Long-term (20-year) and large forest health stewardship contracting, collaboratively determined based on the science-based needs of the ecosystem to support diverse and sustainable economic utilization of small diameter materials including biomass should be pursued. 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.

C. GOVERNORS' MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. WGA will support the full implementation and funding of the 10-Year Strategy and its revision and report to the Governors on a regular basis on its status. WGA will support direct gubernatorial participation in the implementation at the regional and national levels.
2. WGA will continue to rely on and work closely with its Forest Health Advisory Committee regarding implementation of the 10-Year Strategy. WGA will also continue to support a western governors' seat on the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) and will seek to maximize engagement of its Forest Health Advisors in WFLC activities.
3. WGA is authorized to seek funding from the Administration to assist it with the implementation of this resolution. WGA will post this resolution to its web site to be used and referred to as necessary.

This resolution was originally adopted in 1999 as WGA policy resolution 99-011, in 2002 as policy resolution 02-09 and in 2003 as policy resolution 03-18.