



USDA Forest Service Planned Vegetation Management Actions

Directive: The Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2023 (House Report 117-400), included the following language:

Given the increasing intensity of wildfires in our nation's forests and the effect that unmanaged vegetation can have on increasing the intensity of wildfires, rate of spread, and the number of annual acres of forests burned, the Committee directs the Forest Service to provide a report within 90 days of enactment of this Act on planned vegetation management actions to address the threat of wildfires, including how funding provided through Public Law 117-58 (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) will support this work and accomplish the goals of the recently announced 10 year wildfire strategy.

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service was asked to develop a strategy to increase the agency's efforts to reduce wildfire risk to communities, infrastructure, and our nation's treasured natural resources by a few external groups. As a result, the agency developed the Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) and released it in January 2022. Successful implementation of the WCS is predicated on the Forest Service having the appropriate level of resources to fully implement it. Funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have been significant down payments for the initial implementation of the strategy.

The WCS builds on previous wildfire risk reduction work, including the National Fire Plan and the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. It sets a 10-year goal of treating as many as 50 million acres on high-risk firesheds—up to 20 million acres on National Forest System (NFS) lands and up to 30 million acres on other Federal, State, Tribal, and private lands in the West to reduce wildfire risk to communities and infrastructure and improve forest resilience. Since the initial announcement, the agency has focused its work on 250 high-risk firesheds on NFS lands in the West that present the highest risk to communities and critical infrastructure.

Increasing intensity of wildfires in our nation's forests

Many western landscapes are at grave and growing risk of extreme wildfire impacts due to a combination of accumulating fuels, persistent drought, a warming climate and less predictable weather, nearly 100 years of fire exclusion policies, and human-caused ignitions. Further, fire-prone landscapes without adequate building codes and requirements for home hardening has created a situation where communities and critical infrastructure have growing risk of catastrophic impacts from fire. Each factor alone elevates the risk, but the layering of each factor on the next has increased the risk exponentially, reaching the crisis proportions we see today.

Over the past several decades, wildfire activity, length of wildfire season, and damages attributed to wildfires have increased substantially. Data from the National Interagency Fire Center show an upward trend of annual acres burned on lands managed by Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, States, and others. Comparison of the 10-year average of acres burned annually (7.4 million acres) to the 5-year average (8.1 million acres) is further indication of an upward trend.

Wildfire Crisis Strategy

In April 2022, the Forest Service initiated much-needed work on ten at risk landscapes across the Western states. In 2023, the Forest Service increased the scope of our investment with 11 additional landscapes. These 21 targeted investments span upward of 45 million acres, and wildfire risk reduction work will occur in 134 of the 250 high-risk firesheds in the western U.S. where projects are already underway. More information is available on the Wildfire Crisis Strategy website¹ and the StoryMap² which are updated regularly with progress and landscape stories.

Planned vegetation management actions to address the threat of wildfires

The Forest Service is using every tool and authority we have available to address the growing wildfire threat, make communities safer, and reduce risk to critical infrastructure and natural resources. These include the Western Fireshed Emergency Action Determination, stewardship contracting, Good Neighbor Authority, Tribal contracting and agreements, and other partnerships and contracting avenues – to enhance our ability to accomplish the important work funded and authorized by the BIL and the IRA.

Funding provided in BIL supports a broad suite of activities to reduce wildfire risk. Vegetation management and implementing the WCS are crucial pieces of the overall work. Actions to address the threat of wildfires and achieve relief from hazards threatening human health and safety or mitigation of threats to natural resources on National Forest System or adjacent land, include:

- salvage of dead or dying trees
- harvest of trees damaged by fire, wind or ice
- commercial and noncommercial sanitation harvest of trees to control insects or disease, including trees already infested with insects or disease
- removal of hazardous trees near roads and trails
- removal of hazardous fuels
- reforestation or replanting of fire impacted areas through planting, control of competing vegetation, or other activities that enhance natural regeneration and restore forest species
- restoration of water sources or infrastructure

¹ <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/wildfire-crisis>

² <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/0fe032e92fad464fbcdc7faf12cd7928/>

- reconstruction of existing utility lines
- replacement of underground cables
- prescribed fire
- creating fuelbreaks

Funding sources and goals of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy

The below table highlights the estimated number acres to be treated in FY2023 and outyear acres to be treated on the 21 landscapes as part of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy. Funding for this work is provided by BIL, IRA, and other sources (e.g., Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program).

Landscape	FY2023 Acres	Outyear Acres
R1—Kootenai Complex	8,169	20,767
R1—Nez Perce Clearwater	5,000	55,000
R2—Colorado Front Range	16,091	69,550
R3—Prescott	12,829	65,979
R3—4FRI	198,102	529,145
R3—Enchanted Circle	8,497	39,227
R3—San Carlos Apache Tribal Forest Protection Act Project	2,417	87,000
R4—Southwest Idaho	38,100	116,500
R4—Pine Valley Priority Landscape	6,554	43,446
R4—Sierra and Elko Fronts Priority Landscape	22,000	208,000
R4—Wasatch Priority Landscape	14,200	105,800
R5—Stanislaus	23,200	77,700
R5—North Yuba	11,250	33,750
R5—Plumas Community Protection	74,000	185,000
R5—Southern California Fireshed Risk Reduction	5,000	27,500
R5—Trinity County Forest Health and Fire Resilient Communities	6,855	65,000
R5/6—Klamath River Basin Wildfire Risk Reduction	52,080	216,995
R6—Central Oregon Landscape	23,800	74,300
R6—Central Washington Initiative	22,700	68,100
R6—Colville Northeast Washington Vision	2,000	20,000
R6—Mt Hood Wasco County Collaborative	4,400	8,000
Total All Landscapes	557,244	2,116,759

Community Wildfire Defense Grant Program

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law also established a new Community Wildfire Defense Grant (CWDG) program. In cooperation with States, the Forest Service will award grants to at-risk communities, including Tribal communities, to assist them with planning for and mitigating wildfire risks. CWDG supports the agency’s all-lands approach to making communities safer and is part of a broader suite of wildfire risk reduction work, including the Wildfire Crisis Strategy

landscapes.

On March 20, 2023, the Secretary announced 100 CWDG proposed projects (99 of which were funded) for \$197 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding. Those projects are in 22 states and include seven Tribes. The CWDG authorizing statute specifies three priority criteria for funding awards: (1) an area identified as having high or very high wildfire hazard potential, (2) a low-income community, or (3) a community impacted by a severe disaster. All the projects announced in March are in high or very high hazard potential priority areas with 84 of them meeting all three priority criteria, and 86 of them in low-income communities. Of the 100 total projects, 36 are for developing or updating Community Wildfire Protection Plans and 64 are for implementing projects on the ground, including hazardous fuels reduction work. There are 21 CWDG project locations within the 21 Wildfire Crisis Landscapes of which 20 are in counties that are low income.