

# Forest Service 2014 Wildland Fire Risk Management Protocols

The Chief's stated vision for success in the 2014 fire season is *safely achieving reasonable objectives with the least firefighter exposure necessary, while enhancing stakeholder support for our management efforts.*

Building on lessons learned in 2013 and properly using all aspects of Risk Management continues to provide the best framework to successfully achieve this vision. Together, the companion Wildfire Response Protocol and Prescribed Fire Risk Management Protocol form the basic framework for wildland fire risk management in the US Forest Service. While many of you have been doing the activities and/or actions outlined in these protocols, please review your work to determine if you can improve, or make adjustments, to achieve continued and greater success. We must begin preparations for the 2014 fire season in earnest.

## Forest Service Wildfire Response Protocol

In concert with the Federal Fire Policy, sound decision making for wildfire response relies on identifying reasonable objectives for protection of critical values at risk, while considering the amount and quality of firefighter exposure and probability of success. This protocol is broken down into three phases; **Pre-Season** (*Engaging the fire before it starts*); **During Incident** (*Managing incident uncertainty and inherent risk*) and **After Incident** (*Learning and improving*).

### PHASE I – PRE-SEASON

Pre-season preparedness is critical to a successful response when a fire starts. In addition to the annual fire refresher and work capacity test, we need to address other aspects of preparedness. The following should be accomplished Pre-Season, before a fire starts:

- Build decision maker and key stakeholder capacity to manage the uncertainties and inherent risks of fires.
  - Increase understanding of risk management with key stakeholders and partner agencies.
  - Build Agency Administrator capacity to perform as risk managers.
  - Build Incident Management Team (IMT) capacity and improve IMT skills in operational risk management to ensure success of Agency Administrators.
- Assess risk at a landscape level, looking at National Forest Systems (NFS) lands and those adjoining lands that may be impacted by a fire leaving NFS land. Compare the assessments to the goals and objectives in the Land Resource Management Plan (LRMP).
  - Develop a common understanding of values to be protected by answering three questions; 'What is important?' 'Why is it important?' and 'How important is it?'
  - Complete a risk analysis, with key stakeholders and partner agencies, to predetermine the optimal response strategies for protecting values at risk. Engage key stakeholders and partner agencies in tabletop exercises or other venues to ensure alignment.
  - Initiate dialogue with line officers and stakeholders aimed at understanding, acceptance, and support for alternative risk-based decisions. This is especially important where there is an expectation that a fire will become a long-term event, because of an opportunity to use fire to achieve land management objectives, and/or the need to adjust the level of engagement based on exposure of responders to risk, and the level of risk toward values to be protected.

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## PHASE II – DURING INCIDENT

The **During Incident** phase tests our pre-season work and our ability to apply risk management principles. As acknowledged by the National Cohesive Strategy for Wildland Fire Management:

*“Safe aggressive initial attack is often the best suppression strategy to keep unwanted wildfires small and costs down.”*

This strategy should be applied to initial attack where the pre-identified values to be protected are at the greatest risk. Decisions will be based on firefighter/aviator/public safety, values at risk, and probability of success. Sound financial management will be implemented and costs will not drive, but be an output of the best risk informed decisions to protect values.

Should a fire escape our best initial attack efforts, we must be prepared to manage the uncertainty and inherent risk associated with an emerging incident. To be successful in the **During Incident** phase, we should follow the objectives outlined below in the **Standards for Managing Incident Risk**:

### Standards for Managing Incident Risk

Complexity and potential risk of incidents varies greatly. Implementation of these standards requires careful judgment; as the potential risk of an incident increases, the successful risk manager will increase his or her due diligence in meeting these standards.

1. **Complete an Incident Risk Assessment**
  - Develop an assessment of what is at risk (from pre-season work or input from key stakeholders for boundary incidents), probabilities of harm, and possible mitigations.
2. **Complete a Risk Analysis**
  - Consider alternatives (objectives, strategies and tactics) against desired outcomes, respondent exposure, probability of success, and values to be protected.
3. **Complete Two-Way Risk Communications**
  - Engage community leaders, local government officials, partners, and other key stakeholders associated with the incident to share the risk picture and enlist input.
4. **Conduct Risk Sharing Dialogue (using “Red Book”, Chapter 05.11 framework’s 10 questions)**
  - Engage line officers in dialogue aimed at understanding, acceptance, and support for the alternatives and likely decision.
5. **Make the Risk Informed Decision**
  - Develop a time frame to revisit the decision.
6. **Document the Risk** assessment, analysis, communication, sharing, and decision in WFDSS.
7. **Continue Monitoring and Adjusting** as necessary or as conditions change.
  - Monitor incident situation; revise the risk process as warranted by changing conditions. Re-engage stakeholders and senior officials as appropriate. Significant changes will likely require updates to the published decision and risk support work.

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## Expected Outcomes of Applying Standards for Managing Incident Risk

Effective interaction between Agency Administrators and Incident Commanders is essential to safe, efficient and effective management of incidents, using:

- the **Right Plan** (*i.e., as informed by the **Standards for Managing Incident Risk***);
- in the **Right Place** (*i.e., where we have a reasonable probability of success*);
- at the **Right Time** (*i.e., under favorable conditions for efficient and effective suppression*);
- with the **Right Assets** (*i.e., only those suppression assets needed to safely implement tactics in support of reasonable objectives*); and
- for the **Right Duration** (*i.e., release assets as soon as they are no longer needed or other actions to reduce exposure duration*).

Careful attention to these five “**Rights**” will limit unnecessary exposure and expenditure.

## PHASE III – AFTER INCIDENT

As a learning organization we should strive to improve how we do business and seek to learn from each incident. The following **After Incident** tasks support that process:

- Complete an incident After Action Review.
  - Engage key stakeholders in an incident Review to determine what did and did not work, and suggest improvements.
- Conduct a peer review after action process.
  - Engage others who have had similar incidents to learn strategies for improvement.
- Implement plans for improvement.
  - Identify who is responsible for ensuring the identified improvement plans are implemented.

## Forest Service Prescribed Fire Risk Management Protocol

The application of prescribed fire presents one of the best opportunities for achieving our land management objectives on a meaningful scale for the restoration of fire adapted ecosystems, wildlife habitat, and the reduction of future risk posed by wildfire. However, we also acknowledge that prescribed fire presents an inherent level of risk at all levels from decision-makers to on-the-ground firefighters and the public. The Chief’s intent for prescribed fire is that it be managed with the same rigor, oversight, and risk-informed decision-making we undertake in our wildfire response. In addition to the principles described in the Chief’s Letter of Intent, we also embrace the following protocol and associated principles specific to prescribed fire risk:

## PHASE I – PRE-SEASON

1. Risk Analysis Blending Science with Experience – Engage in meaningful risk analysis to identify threats to values, potential benefits from various management interventions, the risks involved with initiating action as well as risks related to not taking action (no Zero Risk). Use the best available information and appropriate analytical tools along with the intuitive knowledge that exists among our experienced workforce, cooperators, and partners.
2. The Reward Justifies the Risk - When considering the use of prescribed fire, we will make every effort to make reasoned and informed risk management decisions. We will only proceed when we have determined that prescribed fire is the most practical method, of those available, for achieving the desired results and that the expected benefits warrant the perceived risks.

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4. No Surprises – Over-inform, don't under-inform; engage stakeholders, don't wait for them to come to you.
  - Build stakeholder and community support by seeking buy-in at every opportunity from risk analysis through project development; don't wait until it is time to implement.
  - Coordinate prescribed burns with appropriate partners.
  - Communicate with appropriate adjacent land management agencies, communities, elected officials, etc., about intention to conduct prescribed burns within the local areas, especially those located near communities.
  - Where possible, distribute interagency notifications (press releases) within communities to inform the public of the intention to conduct prescribed burns.
5. Engage in Risk Sharing Dialogue - The focal point for managing risk in the prescribed fire program lies in fostering the partnership between agency administrators at all levels and their supporting fire management staffs. To assist in this pursuit, the following guidance is provided to all Forests and Regions for the 2014 field season:

It is the expectation that Forest Supervisors will communicate with their Regional Forester and/or designated staff about their Forest's prescribed fire program prior to each anticipated burning season. This dialog not only meets the policy requirement for the Regional Forester to provide program oversight, but also serves as the basis for the Regional Office's understanding and support of your program. The Chief's expectation is that line officers and fire managers at all levels will maintain this dialog on a continual basis. The goal is for all of us to better understand the nature of the prescribed fire program's aims, its risks, and the role that each of us plays in supporting each other as we deliver this vitally important program. As part of the dialog with the Region, Forest Supervisors should be prepared to discuss the following:

- Briefly summarize your anticipated prescribed fire program projects along with any operational concerns that they should be aware of. (Number of projects, complexity levels, objectives to be achieved, relative unit sizes, duration, WUI, etc.)
- Describe any controversial issues associated with implementing the prescribed fires.
- Describe the unit's intent for engaging all line officers, interagency cooperators and fire staffs as the prescribed fire projects are implemented.
- What impact do extenuating circumstances such as extended drought conditions, insect infestation, neighboring development, etc. have on the planned projects?
- How have you engaged with the public, our cooperators and other partners and made them aware of your upcoming burns(s)?
- Are there other aspects of your program they should know about?

In turn, the Regional Forester and Forest Supervisor will be prepared to discuss with their subordinate line officers and staff:

- Who at the Forest/District is delegated authority to approve prescribed fire plans and authorize their ignition at the Low, Moderate, and High complexity levels? (must meet training, certification, and documentation requirements per FSM 5140, FSH 5109.17, and Forest Service Fire and Aviation Qualifications Guide)
- The Regional Forester or Forest Supervisor may be required (e.g. National PL 4/5) or elect to exercise additional oversight of the prescribed fire program (e.g. national/regional conditions including resource availability, weather, changed fuel conditions, or social/political sensitivities). Regional Foresters and Forest Supervisors should be prepared to describe the

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conditions that will trigger additional dialog, concurrence, or approval by the next higher authority and the particulars of how that process will take place.

## PHASE II – PRESCRIBED FIRE IMPLEMENTATION

**Prescribed Fire as Part of the Overall Fire Management Workload** – Prescribed fire is not separate from but must be integrated with the overall fire management workload which includes wildfire response, prevention, etc. Prescribed fire is a central function of a comprehensive fire management program and we plan, train, and execute it accordingly.

We continue to strive to develop procedures and standards for prescribed fire implementation and wildfire response that are as similar as practical in order to improve performance and reliability in all FAM operations through the use of common ideals, terminology and practices.

### Effective Outcomes of Cultivating Effective Agency Administrator – Fire Manager Partnerships

Effective interaction between Agency Administrators and Fire Management staff at all levels is essential for safe, efficient, and effective management of prescribed fire utilizing:

- the **Right Plan** (*i.e., as informed by the Complexity Analysis and Prescribed Fire Burn Plan*);
- in the **Right Place** (*i.e., where we have identified priority areas for treatment and have a reasonable probability of success in applying prescribed fire*);
- at the **Right Time** (*i.e., when we have favorable conditions for efficient and effective operations*);
- with the **Right Assets** (*i.e., those assets needed to safely implement the burn(s) in support of objectives including firefighter & public safety and protection of values potentially at risk – reference Holding Plans, Contingency Plans, Staffing & Action Plans, etc.*); and
- for the **Right Duration** (*i.e., there is sufficient time to implement and secure the burn(s) in order to avoid critical fire weather events, smoke incursions, or similar concerns*).

## PHASE III – LEARNING AND CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

As a learning organization implementing a prescribed fire program, we should strive to improve our overall program delivery by seeking to retain and transfer lessons learned on a continual basis. Consider implementing the following actions which support that process:

- On prescribed fire projects, every operational period should strive to conclude with a short After Action Review (AAR) to continually hone firefighter awareness and information sharing.
- Periodically, complete Seasonal Reviews for prescribed fire program, preferably soon after the end of a prescribed fire season.
  - Include fire management, resource staff, and line officers with focus not only on operational concerns, but also administrative, natural resource, and risk management concerns.
  - Look outside the organization; engage key stakeholders and cooperators to find out what did and did not work for them and solicit suggestions for improvement.
- Conduct peer-to-peer review of after action findings.
  - Engage other prescribed fire program leaders and share experiences, find commonalities, and devise strategies for improvements.
- Share what you have learned.
  - Through Forest-Wide, Regional, and National meetings and trainings.

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- Through Prescribed Fire Consortia and other communities of practice.
  - Through the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.
- Prepare and implement plans for improvement.
  - Engage leaders at the Forest, Regional, and National Level to share your lessons, identify strategies for improvement, identify tasks required to pursue those strategies, and determine who will be responsible for pursuing each task.