

# NEPA

# on Fire

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A monthly fact sheet about fuels treatments and the NEPA process.

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A forum for fuels specialists;  
NEPA coordinators, writers,  
and editors; silviculturists; and  
others interested in  
accomplishing fuels hazard  
reduction projects.



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## President Bush signs the Healthy Forests Restoration Act

On December 3, 2003, President Bush signed the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which strengthens the administration's commitment to remove the build up of underbrush that promotes wildland fires and insect destruction in forest communities.

Hazardous fuels reduction on Federal lands is a key part of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act. The following is a summary of the Act's points regarding hazardous fuels projects.

**Authorized hazardous fuels projects**—Hazardous fuels projects covered by the Act include those on Federal land:



- In wildland-urban interface areas;
- In Condition Classes 2 and 3 that meet certain criteria;
- Containing windthrow or blowdown, ice storm damage, an epidemic of disease or insects;
- Adjacent to land infected with disease or insects that is posing a threat to an ecosystem component or resource on the Federal or non-Federal land; and
- Containing threatened and endangered species habitat under certain conditions.

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## Regional Strategies Developed for Hazardous Fuels

*The 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan* (May 2002), developed in collaboration with our government partners, tribes, States, and nongovernment organizations, outlines the Forest Service's long-term national strategy to address the wildland fire and hazardous fuels situation and the need for habitat restoration and rehabilitation. We also have a strategy for fuels

treatment in *Protecting People and Sustaining Resources in Fire-Adapted Ecosystems—A Cohesive Strategy* (October 2000). These documents give us a framework for accelerating vegetative treatments to improve conditions on National Forest System lands. Successful implementation of these strategies will result in landscape-scale changes that will significantly reduce the potential for large, damaging fires in priority areas

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Authorized hazardous fuels projects will be consistent with land and resource management plans, administrative policies, and decisions applicable to the Federal land covered by the project. Annually, not more than 20 million acres of Federal land will be treated under authorized hazardous fuels projects. Excluded areas include components of the National Wilderness Preservation System, Federal land on which the removal of vegetation is prohibited or restricted by another act or Presidential proclamation, and Wilderness Study Areas. There are also special provisions regarding old growth and large-tree retention.

**Prioritization**—An annual program of work, which prioritizes authorized hazardous fuels projects, will be developed for Federal land to

provide protection for at-risk communities or watersheds or to implement community wildland fire protection plans.

**Environmental analysis**—A variety of requirements will be considered to limit the range of alternatives for authorized hazardous fuels projects depending on the proximity to the wildland-urban interface. The planning process for authorized hazardous fuels projects also includes requirements for a public meeting and collaboration.

**Special administrative review process**—Regulations developed for a pre-decisional administrative review will be the only way that someone can seek administrative consideration regarding an authorized hazardous fuels project on National Forest System lands.

**Judicial review**—Authorized hazardous fuels projects will be subject to judicial review only in the United States District Court where the project is located. The Act also encourages an expeditious judicial review, including consideration of the short- and long-term ecosystem effects of undertaking the agency action versus not taking the agency action in responding to any request for an injunction.

**Authorization of appropriations**—The Act authorizes \$760 million annually for hazardous fuels reduction activities.

In *NEPA on Fire* Issue 4, we will provide a Website address for the final Act. Meanwhile, more information is available at <<http://agriculture.senate.gov/forest/forhxact.htm>>.

Regional Strategies Developed for Hazardous Fuels . . . continued from page 1

that historically depended on fire to maintain ecosystem health.

Participants at the National Leadership Team meeting in October 2003 agreed that each Forest Service region would develop a 5-year integrated strategy outlining how to address the need for habitat restoration and rehabilitation. Regional strategies will consider national expectations for landscape-scale treatments, the sensible and effective use of resources, and how to develop collaborative relationships with partners. Regional staff areas are designing land management programs to achieve resource-specific objectives, such as wildlife habitat enhancement, forest health

improvement, or range betterment, to synergistically create landscape patterns that lessen the likelihood of large fires.

Treatments must be at meaningful scales, of a sufficient acreage, and result in vegetation density reduction. Treatments also must be in a strategic pattern that advantageously uses the existing mosaic of fire scars, existing openings, and previously treated areas.

By focusing the majority of all treatments in priority fire-dependent landscapes, we can make a difference. Because landscapes that are not



considered high priority will receive less attention in the short term, it is critical to involve all key resource staff areas when designing landscapes and planning projects. Regional strategies will stress collaboration among governments, stakeholders, and citizens to enhance planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and learning.

# FAQs

## Identifying Your Cumulative Effects Area

**Q** What is a practical way for an interdisciplinary team (IDT) to identify the geographic area when conducting cumulative effects analysis?

**A** The IDT can begin to develop a preliminary cumulative effects analysis on geographic areas as soon as the components of the proposed action alternatives are identified—even before public scoping. An early start gives the team time to work through the subsequent details and identify data gaps.

Teams should consider the following approach.

**1. Identify all components of the proposed action and alternatives.** Include every action connected to the main action. For example, the main action of mechanical thinning might have connected actions of road building or repair and off-site rock crushing for road gravel. Or, the main action of prescribed burning might have a connected action of developing an off-site temporary water source for wet lines.

- 2. Map the area potentially affected by the proposed action or alternatives.** Map the areas that could be directly and indirectly affected. Direct effects occur at the same time and place as the proposed activities. Indirect effects are caused by the proposed activities but might occur at a later time or a different place.
- 3. Identify the resources within the potentially affected area.** When possible, display all relevant resource information on the map from existing data sources. Supplement your resource information with new data, as appropriate.
- 4. Identify the cumulative effects area for each affected resource.** For each affected resource, the cumulative effects area contains the entire area of direct and indirect effects for that resource expanded to the point where the effects are stable or minimal regardless of administrative or ownership boundaries. When the IDT is done, there should be a variety of cumulative effects



analysis boundaries based on the affected resource considerations. Remember to consider air shed and social/community boundaries.

- 5. Use the scoping process to refine the geographic area of cumulative effects.** An often-neglected source of information is public scoping. Review your scoping materials to make certain you have identified any concerns about cumulative impacts.

After completing the above steps, the IDT can focus on the meaningful effects of the proposed action and alternatives combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions **within each defined cumulative effects area.**

Additional information is at <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/resources/policies/nepa/cumulative.pdf>.



## Letters to the Editor

Several readers noted that the *On the Web NEPA Training* article in our November issue of *NEPA on Fire* referred to the agency's 1900-1 Forest Plan Implementation course as an online course. We apologize for any misunderstanding. The Website provided in the November article, <http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/em/nepa/>

[nepa\\_coordination\\_training/00index.html](http://nepa_coordination_training/00index.html), contains the lesson plans, slides, workbook files, and references for the 5-day onsite course. While there is no substitute for the experience to be gained by taking the course in a classroom setting, the information provided on the Web site is useful for anyone on an interdisciplinary team.

The schedule of the 1900-1 Forest Plan Implementation classroom courses is also available on the aforementioned Website under **logistics, schedule of sessions.**

Send YOUR questions or comments to

**NEPA on Fire**

## Take Action on the No Action Alternative

The no action alternative for a site-specific fuels treatment project means that neither the proposed action nor any of the other action alternatives would be selected for implementation. However, environmental consequences could occur even though no action is taken. A mistake some interdisciplinary teams (IDT) make is to pay too little attention to analysis of the no action alternative.



During the initial stages of project planning, the IDT should take time to discuss the effects of the no action alternative. The initial evaluation provides a common starting point, helps refine the project's purpose and need, and focuses the analysis. It is the foundation for all discussions provided in the NEPA document.

Discussion of the environmental consequences of the no action alternative should support the purpose and need of the project proposal. For example, if the proposed action is to reintroduce fire to a site to reduce fuel loads while increasing seral vegetation used by an endangered species, then the analysis of the no action alternative might consider the effects of increased fuel loads, a decline in seral vegetation, and the potential negative impacts to the endangered species and its habitat.



The environmental consequences of the no action alternative are also a reference point to compare the effects of the action alternatives. It is particularly useful for framing the context and intensity of effects to be considered in determining whether a Finding of No Significant Impact can be made from an environmental assessment.

The length of the write-up for the no action alternative should be comparable to that of the proposed action alternative, and it should address the same issues as the action alternatives. Lastly, the graphic presentation of the no action alternative should be equivalent to that presented for the action alternatives.



### On the Web

#### Forest Service Directives

Did you know that all Forest Service directives are on the FS Web? The Forest Service Directive System, consisting of manuals and handbooks, codifies agency policy, practice, and procedure. The system serves as the primary basis for the internal management and control of all programs and is the primary source of administrative direction to Forest Service employees.

You can find Forest Service manuals and handbooks by selecting **Directives** from the menu on the left side of the FS Web home page screen or by going directly to <<http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/directives>>.

Interim directives replace or complement the existing directive for a specified period, so it is important to check them. They are located on the bottom of the indexed Web page.

Of particular interest to a fuels specialist on an interdisciplinary team is Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 (FSH 1909.15), Environmental Policies and Procedures. This handbook provides guidance for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act, including direction for analyzing and documenting the environmental consequences of proposed actions. You can navigate to FSH 1909.15 from the directives Web page or you can go directly to <[http://](http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/directives/fsh/1909.15)

[fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/directives/fsh/1909.15](http://fsweb.wo.fs.fed.us/directives/fsh/1909.15)>.

FSH 1909.15 is divided into six chapters. Chapter 10 provides guidelines on scoping and environmental analysis. Chapter 20 addresses environmental impact statements and related documents. Chapter 30 identifies categorical exclusions. Chapter 40 covers environmental assessments and related documents. Chapter 50 describes implementation and monitoring requirements. Chapter 60 includes the text of pertinent laws, regulations, memoranda, and other materials that might be useful to conduct the procedures in this handbook.