

## Interview with Tom Harbour

By George Leonard

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**Forest Service retirees are concerned about changes in fire suppression policies. In response to these concerns, Tom Harbour, Director of Fire and Aviation Management, has agreed to respond to questions about the policies and how they are being implemented in the upcoming (2009) fire season.**

I am pleased to be asked to comment. Forest Service retirees are a source of wisdom and understanding in dealing with fire management challenges.

**Question: Tom, you are aware of concerns that retirees have been expressing about the application of Wildland Fire Use (WFU), Appropriate Management Response (AMR), and other fire management strategies. We understand you are proposing some changes this season. Would you explain the changes and how they are being implemented?**

A good place to start is with a common understanding of some of the factors that contributed to the current state of wildland fire management. As you know, late in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, long-standing fire exclusion policies began to evolve as we gained a better understanding of the role of fire in resources management and the consequences of vigorous suppression. Growing urban and suburban areas came into increasing contact with growing fuel loads and out-of-balance ecosystems. Climate change and drought exacerbated fire behavior, putting more people at risk on the fireline and in communities.

A better understanding of these factors and their effects has led to some changes in the way we implement fire policy, though the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Policy itself is unchanged. Last year, the Wildland Fire Leadership Council asked for some key changes in the way we implement fire policy. The Chief signed a letter April 9, 2009 that accompanied the *Guidance for Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy*. This updated implementation guidance changes some elements of wildland fire management, including WFU and AMR.

First of all, the updated guidance defines wildland fire as any non-structure fire that occurs in the wildland. Wildland Fire Use (WFU) as a separate category of fire is gone. The updated guidance moves us from three kinds of wildland fires to two.

- **Wildfires** are unplanned ignitions or prescribed fires that are declared wildfires. Wildfires include fires formerly called WFU.
- **Prescribed fires** are planned ignitions.

Secondly, updated guidance permits the management of a wildland fire for one or more concurrent objectives, such as suppression *and* resource benefit. Those objectives can change as the fire spreads across the landscape and encounters new fuels, weather, social considerations, and jurisdictions. Fire managers can also change objectives as availability of firefighting resources changes. We expect this flexibility to improve our ability to put firefighting resources on the highest value objectives more safely, where they are most

likely to be successful, and improve the condition of the land, where we manage fire for resource objectives.

Key to this flexible/two fire approach is the development of science-based decision support tools that help us manage fire smarter. The Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) goes into wider use this fire season. WFDSS is an array of decision support tools that calculate risk and probability and predict what may happen on a fire. WFDSS uses data, such as topographical and climatic data, to estimate what the potential fire size would be if no suppression actions were taken. WFDSS gives managers better information about where and how a fire is expected to burn and what values may be at risk, so they can utilize available resources more strategically. Managers can deploy firefighters and resources where they are most likely to be effective, rather than apply overwhelming mass when WFDSS indicates such tactics would have little impact on the outcome. WFDSS will not make decisions; people make decisions. But, WFDSS gives even the most experienced managers more information, so they can better practice the science, as well as the art, of managing wildland fire.

The federal wildland fire agencies and bureaus are working together to develop unified direction and guidance for these changes in policy implementation, updating manuals, directives, plans, agreements, and other pertinent documents. And, we are developing accountability standards, performance measures, and tracking systems to measure our success in meeting resource and protection objectives in the management of fires.

I want to be clear, however, that any management response to a wildland fire on federal land will continue to be based on objectives established in the applicable Land and Resource Management Plan and/or Fire Management Plan. These Plans and the updated implementation guidance create the framework in which we can manage fire for resource benefit.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that initial attack objectives on human-caused wildfire have not changed. The USFS will continue to suppress all human-caused wildfires to minimize negative consequences to firefighter and public safety. Human-caused fires will not be managed for resource benefit.

**Question: Wildland Fire Use has caused much concern. Can you outline the circumstances in which it will be used?**

In the updated guidance for implementation of fire policy, Wildland Fire Use is no longer a separate category for management of wildland fires. Managers can now manage any wildfire or portions of a wildfire—as long as it is not human-caused—to accomplish resource objectives established in the applicable LRMP. As you know, LRMPs reflect extensive public, partner, and inter-government participation, and the land units that permit fire for resource benefit are well identified. However, though the LRMP may identify an area as appropriate for fire for resource benefit, fire managers are not required to use that strategy. Based on their own experience and with the support of WFDSS,

managers will determine the strategy that will best accomplish objectives. Managers will always stress human safety as the primary objective. They will continue to rely heavily on the unit's annual FMP, which will integrate and update all wildland fire management and related activities according to LRMP direction.

When considering management of a fire for resource objectives, it is important to keep in mind that the revised policy implementation guidance calls for more collaboration with all partners and publics. Collaboration will occur in both fire planning and response, with special attention to mutual expectations and agreements. The updated implementation guidance promotes FMPs that are intergovernmental in scope and landscape in scale. The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with communities to prepare them for the eventuality of wildland fire. But, regardless of where they occur, all human-caused wildfires will be suppressed with the least negative consequences to firefighter and public safety; human-caused fires will not be managed for resource benefit.

A key principle that drives the use of fire for resource benefit is landscape restoration. Fire does have a critical role in many ecosystems. We want to return fire to the landscape with the right fire at the right place at the right time with the right objectives. We will use prescribed fire and, where appropriate, wildfire as tools to restore health to ecosystems.

**Question: On Units where WFU may take place, how does the assessment of resource benefits vs. resource damage take place? What is the role of the Line Officer? What are the requirements for documentation?**

Managing fire for resource benefit will occur only where permitted in the LRMP, where the analysis of effects is documented. As line officers, Forest Supervisors sign annual Fire Management Plans that update local conditions and the status of firefighting resources to support LRMP direction. Line Officers (LOs) at all levels have been involved in the development of WFDSS. The Line Officer Team (LOT) includes line officers from the Regional, Forest, and Ranger District levels. The LOT is a working partner with FAM in the development and implementation of all aspects of fire and aviation, and they have been active in development of decision support tools, such as WFDSS.

FAM is actively assisting Regions in training line officers in the use of WFDSS. The goal is to make LOs skilled in the use of WFDSS, so they can develop incident objectives and requirements on their units. In fact, LOs are the risk managers, and WFDSS is a tool to help them and their staff, including IMTs, evaluate trade-offs. Because WFDSS incorporates LRMP/FMP direction for local units, it sets the framework for incident level decision making. LOs understand the changes in wildland fire policy implementation; the use of WFDSS does not provide any additional authorities not included in their LRMPs.

WFDSS is a web-based system that can generate a variety of standard or custom reports. One report, the Decision Analysis Report (DAR), represents the compilation of all

WFDSS subsection information into a single report that becomes the formal decision documentation for the incident. Throughout an incident, the reporting systems in WFDSS continually inform managers and give them the flexibility to make adjustments in management of the incident. Agency Administrators and ICs hold periodic Incident Reviews to identify whether or not a decision needs to be adjusted, or a new decision made.

**Question: How do factors, such as long-term drought, suppression resource availability, and the consequences if the fire does not remain within prescription enter into the decision process? What is the role of the Regional Forester and Chief in providing oversight?**

Prescribed fires that do not remain within prescription are classified as wildfires and are managed as any wildfire would be on that unit. With the aid of decision support tools in WFDSS, managers will make decisions based on the LRMP/FMP, the fluctuating availability of resources, weather and climate, ecological conditions, values-at-risk, social considerations, and their own experience.

Fire Management Plans are revised every year and can reflect changes in environmental conditions. LRMPs can be amended to reflect changes in environmental conditions, such as bug-kill, blow-down, and drought. Local FMPs and LRMP direction are critical components of WFDSS.

Regional Foresters have oversight and decision authority on fires and operate with the full confidence of the Chief. The Chief retains overall oversight authority with a primary focus on very large fires characterized by heightened risks to firefighters and high costs.

**Question: We know that the Forest Service is under pressure from the Administration and the Congress to reduce suppression costs. What steps are you taking to respond?**

We are making better risk-informed decisions in managing fires. Risk-informed decisions place available resources where they will achieve objectives as safely as possible. While suppression costs are a critical piece of fire management, cost is not and cannot be the primary driver for management decisions on wildland fires. Public and firefighter safety are our overriding objectives.

However, better risk-informed decisions and the growing use of WFDSS could result in cost-savings. Using limited firefighting resources more strategically where and when they are most likely to be effective is the smart way to achieve objectives in managing a wildfire. Deploying overwhelming mass is not only expensive, it is often ineffective and in conflict with real risk-informed decision making on wildfires.

**Question: We understand you are implementing a new approach called Strategic Management Response (SMR). How does this approach differ from AMR and what steps are you taking to implement it in 2009?**

We are not implementing Strategic Management Response (SMR). SMR is a fire management approach examined conceptually in the Quadrennial Fire Review. I believe there is significant merit in the approach. I would like feedback from the retiree community on the idea.

**Question: It has been alleged that the Forest Service is being less aggressive in its suppression efforts (not staffing fires at night, etc.). How do you respond?**

We are being more aggressive in developing the tools and talent to manage fire smarter. The most important part of smarter for us is our commitment to firefighter safety. We are smarter about where, when, and how we engage fire. It is not smart to send firefighters into a snag patch at night. We are committed to making better, smarter decisions; we will trade acres that can be re-grown against lives that cannot be replaced. New decision support tools help even the most experienced fire manager identify the risks versus the benefits of all fire management actions. We have learned that 24-hour staffing of firelines can increase firefighter exposure, especially on large fires. However, the same suite of decision support tools that help managers identify and manage risks enable them to deploy resources more strategically and flexibly. That means that greater attention to firefighter safety does not have to reduce our ability to achieve objectives on a fire.