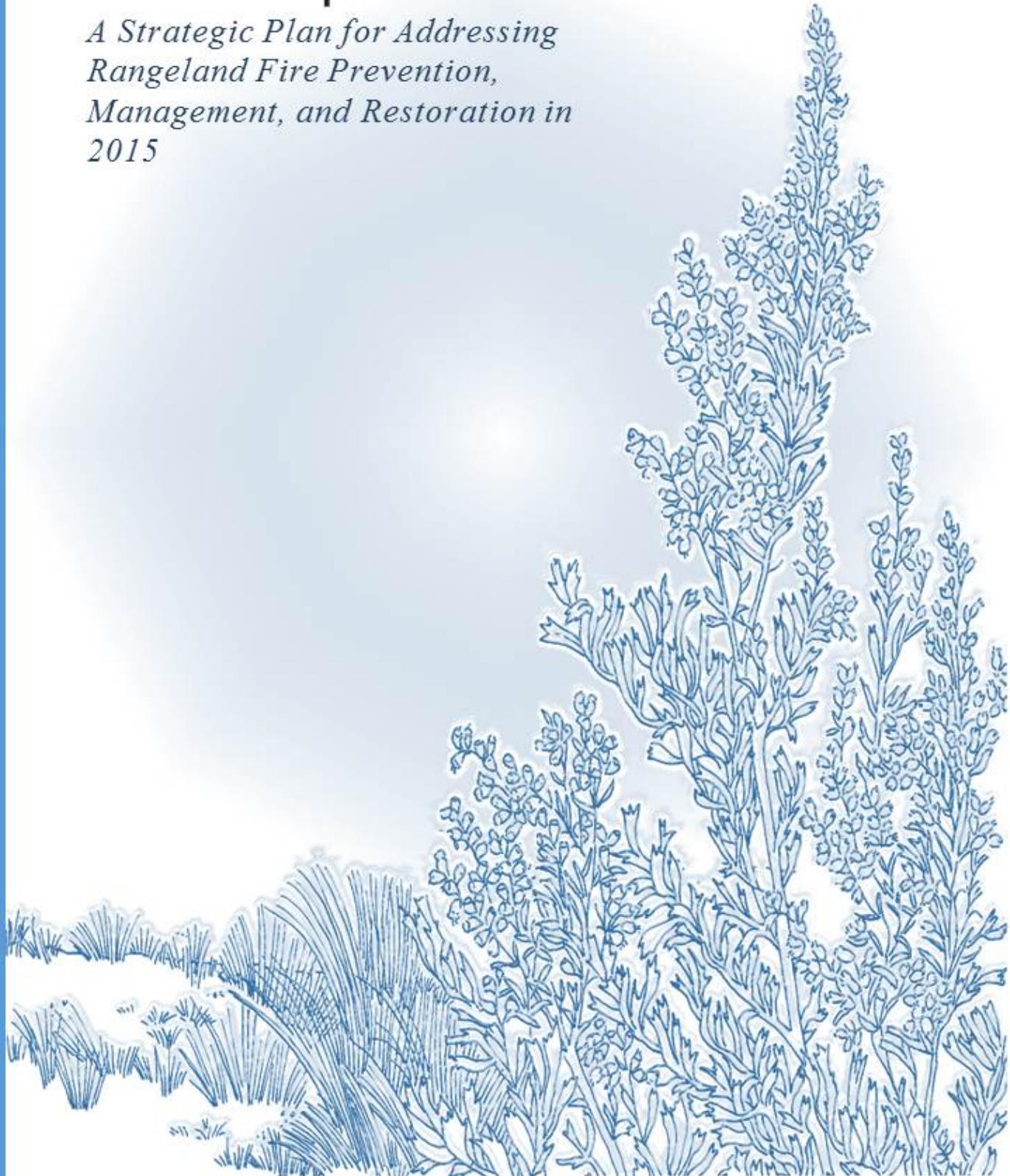


SO 3336 – The Initial Report

*A Strategic Plan for Addressing
Rangeland Fire Prevention,
Management, and Restoration in
2015*



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THE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

Mar 09 2015

Memorandum

To: Secretary of the Interior

From: Deputy Secretary of the Interior 

Subject: SO 3336 - The Initial Report; *A Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration in 2015*

Secretarial Order 3336, *Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management and Restoration*, established a Rangeland Fire Task Force (Task Force) with a charge to present an initial report no later than March 1, 2015, on actions to be implemented prior to the onset of the 2015 Western fire season. As Chair of the Task Force, I am pleased to present for your review that report, entitled, “*SO 3336 – The Initial Report: A Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration in 2015.*”

The report outlines immediate actions to address the threat of rangeland fire in the Great Basin region, prior to the onset of the 2015 Western wildfire season. The report also identifies several related actions and activities to begin in 2015, with full implementation in 2016 and beyond.

On behalf of the Task Force I recommend you accept and approve these actions and direct that the entities identified as the Responsible Parties for each action proceed with implementation.

Concur:



Mar 09 2015

Sally Jewell, Secretary

Date

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Introduction

The accelerated invasion of non-native annual grasses, in particular cheatgrass and medusahead rye, and the spread of pinyon-juniper across the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem, along with drought, and the effects of climate change, have created an increased threat of rangeland fires to the sagebrush landscape and the more than 350 species of plants and animals, such as mule deer and pronghorn antelope, that rely on this critically important ecosystem. In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) found that the invasion of annual grasses and the loss of habitat from wildfire in the Great Basin is a significant threat to the greater sage-grouse in that portion of its remaining range. The FWS is now considering whether protections under the Endangered Species Act are warranted. The increased frequency and intensity of rangeland fire also poses a significant threat to the many tribal and local communities, ranchers, hunters, and others, who live in, work, and/or value the iconic sagebrush-steppe landscape and who, for generations, have depended upon these lands and resources to sustain their way of life.

Secretarial Order 3336 (the Order) places a priority on “protecting, conserving, and restoring the health of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem and, in particular, greater sage-grouse habitat, while maintaining safe and efficient operations,” and looks to the allocation of fire resources and assets associated with wildland fire and investments related to restoration activities to reflect that priority.

Given the high priority placed by the Secretary on addressing the significant threat of rangeland fire, Section 5 of the Order directed the Task Force to deliver to the Secretary a science-based comprehensive strategy to reduce the threat of large-scale rangeland fire to habitat for the greater sage-grouse and the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem through effective rangeland management (including the appropriate use of livestock), fire prevention, fire suppression, and post-fire restoration efforts at a landscape scale. Specifically, the Order calls for an [Implementation Plan](#), issued on February 1, 2015, and two reports—an initial report delivered to the Secretary by March 1, 2015, and a final report, by May 1, 2015. *The Initial Report: A Strategic Plan for Addressing Rangeland Fire Prevention, Management, and Restoration in 2015* (Initial Report), details specific actions and initiatives that will be taken in advance of and during the 2015 Western fire season.

The actions and activities identified and described in this initial report outline actions to improve the efficiency and efficacy of our rangeland fire management efforts in the short-term, prior to the onset of the 2015 Western wildfire season, as directed in the Order. These activities will involve targeted, strategic investments of Departmental resources to enhance efforts to manage rangeland fire in specific portions of the Great Basin and consistent with the Federal Government’s trust responsibility to American Indian tribes and other statutory obligations.

Detailed actions in this first report include recommendations to:

- Prioritize and allocate firefighting assets to give increased focus to suppressing wildfire in highly valuable portions of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem to reduce the loss of critically-important greater sage-grouse habitat; and
- Accelerate efforts to restore rangelands damaged by wildfire with native plants and grasses to help improve the health of this ecosystem.

As part of the development of these actions the Department sent a letter to tribal leaders soliciting their views and comments and a face-to-face Consultation session took place with tribal leaders. In addition, partners, stakeholders, and the public were invited to participate in a conference call to provide input on the proposed actions. Implementation of these actions will take place in continued consultation with tribes and cooperation and coordination with other Federal, state, and local partners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

A set of actions identified in this report will begin in 2015 but will carry on into the future for completion. Those associated actions are identified in the sections entitled, “2015, 2016, and Beyond.”

In addition to Secretarial Order 3336, the President’s FY 2016 budget request renews the call for a new funding framework for wildfire suppression, similar to how the costs for other natural disasters are met. The initiative proposes base level funding of 70 percent of the 10-year average for suppression costs within the discretionary budget with the remaining identified suppression funding need provided through a budget cap adjustment. One percent of the most severe fires comprise 30 percent of the costs. This is a commonsense proposal that has bipartisan Congressional support and would help ensure that the USDA and DOI do not rob budgets for fire prevention and risk management in order to fight the Nation’s most catastrophic fires. Providing stability to the fire budget through the budget cap adjustment will enhance the long-term implementation of actions identified in this initial report, as well as those being developed in association with the final report.

In this report, the terms “rangeland fire” and “wildfire,” used interchangeably, refer to any unplanned, unwanted wildland fire. Appendix A incorporates into a table format, for easy review, the initial set of actions and activities, with responsible parties identified, and target dates established. Appendix B is a brief Glossary of Terms, which may not be familiar to all readers of this document.

SO 3336 Cross-Cutting Action Item

Issue Description/Overview

Develop and share a geospatial tool that highlights areas of concern in the Great Basin and includes, at a minimum, Sage-grouse Focal Areas, Priority Habitat Management areas, and areas identified using the Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool (FIAT).

Methodology

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) will lead an interagency, interdisciplinary team to develop a geospatial tool to provide a common framework and common terminology to support the implementation of the Order.

Responsible Parties: BLM/USGS

Target Date: May 1, 2015

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Section 7(b) i. – Integrated Response Plans

Issue Description/Overview

Design and implement comprehensive, integrated fire response plans for the FIAT evaluation areas and other areas in the Great Basin that prioritize protection of low resilience landscapes most at-risk to detrimental impacts of fire and invasives.

The Order intends to: (1) enhance the capability and capacity of state, tribal, and local government, and non-governmental fire management organizations, including local cooperators (e.g., rangeland fire protection associations, rural fire associations, and volunteer fire departments) through improved and expanded education and training; (2) improve coordination among all partners involved in rangeland fire management to further improve safety and effectiveness; (3) conduct reviews of existing programs policies and practices associated with current prevention, suppression, and restoration of the sagebrush-steppe; and (4) commit wildland fire management resources and assets to prepare for and respond to rangeland fires.

To accomplish these tasks agencies will apply a risk-based, cross-boundary approach to wildland fire response planning and preparedness by incorporating the rangeland fire suppression priorities into the revision of Fire Management Plans (FMPs), Land Use Plans (LUPs), and update computer assisted dispatch (CAD) systems. Doing so ensures the appropriate availability of suppression resources for initial attack response to priority greater sage-grouse habitat.

Priorities remain consistent with the [Guidance for Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy](#), dated February 13, 2009, and priorities outlined in the Order.

Methodology

The BLM, Fire and Aviation will lead the development of all actions associated with this subsection of the Order. To date, they worked with Federal agency wildland fire management staffs and state agency administrators from the Great Basin states to develop the proposed actions outlined below.

These proposed actions incorporate: (1) relevant recommendations from the operations group at [The Next Steppe: Sage Grouse and Rangeland Fire in the Great Basin](#) conference held in Boise, Idaho, the first week of November 2014; (2) fire management knowledge and expertise; and (3) policies and procedures outlined in the [Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations](#) handbook (Red Book), the [National Interagency Mobilization Guide](#), and other Departmental policies.

Actions Underway

For the last three years, dispatch centers within the Great Basin, and those centers with greater sage-grouse habitat, have implemented natural resource protection priorities for wildfire response to sagebrush ecosystems that support greater sage-grouse species. BLM policy and

guidance, including Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Instructional Memoranda, and this prioritization are consistent.

The dispatch centers identified priority areas based upon state fish and wildlife agencies' priority greater sage-grouse maps and the numbers and types of resources for response to those areas in their individual CAD systems. For example, during multiple fire start situations, priority greater sage-grouse areas received additional suppression resources compared to other areas. Continued and enhanced efforts in this regard are now a critical Department of the Interior (DOI) natural resource priority for all of its component agencies and bureaus.

Enhanced training for Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) and rural/volunteer fire departments is underway. In early January 2015, BLM distributed approximately \$500,000 in additional funding to states to support this training, including the states of Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, and Wyoming.

Proposed Actions

Prior to the 2015 Western Wildfire Season

Prior to the 2015 Western wildfire season, all units that manage priority greater sage-grouse habitat will complete the actions identified in this section of the Initial Report:

Action Item #1

Increase the capabilities and use of rural/volunteer fire departments and RFPAs and enhance the development and use of veterans crews. Continue providing training to cooperators, assess training and qualifications needs of cooperators, and expand training opportunities into the future to add significant capacity for initial attack and control of fast-moving wildfires in the Great Basin, with a primary focus in the FIAT areas. Coordinate with state, tribal, and local government partners to leverage training assets and capabilities. Specifically, the DOI/BLM will seek to deliver training to approximately 2,500 cooperators and increase the utilization of veterans crews before the 2015 Western fire season.

Responsible Parties: DOI/BLM Fire Leadership

Target: June 1, 2015

Action Item #2

Ensure local, multi-agency coordination (MAC) groups are functional, and MAC plans are updated. The MAC groups will ensure direction is provided on resource allocation and prioritization for greater sage-grouse habitat protection.

Responsible Parties: MAC groups, working with local Federal wildland fire suppression agencies, tribes, state fire suppression agencies, local fire departments, RFPAs, and other cooperators

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #3

Develop and implement minimum draw-down level¹ and step up plans² to ensure availability of resources for protection in priority greater sage-grouse habitat. All units managing priority greater sage-grouse habitat will develop and implement a minimum draw-down level and step up plans to clearly identify those suppression resources necessary in order to maintain an effective, aggressive initial attack capability.

Responsible Parties: Federal local unit fire management officers (FMOs) in coordination with cooperators and reviewed by Federal state/regional FMOs

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #4

Apply a coordinated, risk-based approach to wildfire response to assure initial attack response to priority areas. Apply a risk-based approach to wildfire response, coordinated across jurisdictional boundaries; review and update CAD systems to assure initial attack response to priority greater sage-grouse areas in protection of greater sage-grouse habitat.

Responsible Parties: Local MAC Groups and unit FMOs, with review by Federal regional/state FMOs

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #5

Develop a standardized set of briefing materials. Prepare standardized briefing materials on sagebrush-steppe and greater sage-grouse wildfire protection for incoming Type 1 – 3 Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and other fire management resources. Materials, at a minimum, include:

- Suppression, operations, and rehabilitation BMPs;
- Maps of priority greater sage-grouse habitat areas, resistant and resilient landscapes, strategic fuel breaks, initial attack asset locations and response times;
- LUPs and FMP guidance;
- Relevant local unit data related to sagebrush-steppe conservation.

Responsible Parties: Geographic Area Coordinating Groups (GACGs) and local MACs

Target: May 1, 2015

¹ The minimum level of personnel and equipment resources needed (at either the local or national level) without compromising response capability.

² Step-up plans, (also called staffing plans), are designed to direct incremental preparedness actions in response to increasing fire danger.

Action Item #6

Review and update local plans and agreements for consistency and currency to ensure initial attack response to priority greater sage-grouse areas. Included are:

- Fire Prevention Plans;
- Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) data updates (relevant local unit data related to sagebrush-steppe conservation and restoration is pre-loaded into the WFDSS);
- Fire Danger Operating Plans (National Fire Danger Rating System);
- Preparedness Level Plans; and
- Up-to-date, approved Agreements and Annual Operating Plans.

Responsible Parties: Federal local unit FMOs, in coordination with cooperators and with review by Federal regional/state FMOs, to provide consistency for all wildland fire related planning and documentation to include greater sage-grouse protection

Target: May 15, 2015

Action Item #7

Develop supplemental guidance for the use of “severity funding³. ” This will focus on maintaining initial attack success rate, capabilities, and preservation of greater sage-grouse priority habitat by developing supplemental guidance for the use of severity funding that provides specific greater sage-grouse stipulations to access funding and implement supplemental fire suppression resources. This will provide the Department the ability to bring in additional non-agency resources to provide protection to sagebrush ecosystems when fuels and weather conditions do not meet the present criteria for severity funding.

Responsible Party: DOI OWF in coordination with the BLM

Target: May 15, 2015

Action Item #8

Evaluate the effectiveness of action plans. Develop annual reporting metrics for effectiveness monitoring of wildland fire response, with particular emphasis on the effectiveness of measures to improve success in rangeland fire response, based upon CAD changes, and reporting of success and/or failure as it pertains to LUPs and FMPs, and effectiveness of enhanced training and capacity measures.

Responsible Parties: DOI OWF and Federal Agency Fire Directors

Target: May 30, 2015

³ Suppression funds used to increase the level of pre-suppression capability and fire preparedness when predicted or actual burning conditions exceed those normally expected, due to severe conditions.

Action Item #9

Increase the availability of technology and technology transfer to fire management managers and suppression resources. Increase access to digital maps and mapping software by providing appropriate technology (such as smartphones and tablets) to fire managers and suppression personnel. Remove barriers for acquisition of appropriate software and hardware.

Responsible Parties: DOI national bureau leadership, DOI state/regional and local unit managers

Target: June 1, 2015

Action #10

Improve the description and awareness of critical resource values threatened in various stages of the fire response process including large fire management. In 2015, improve the collection of information about critical resource values threatened, including greater sage-grouse habitat and populations, on the existing Incident Status Summary (ICS 209) and ensure this information is captured in the Incident Management Situation Report (SIT Report). In 2016, revise the ICS 209 to include specific blocks to collect this information.

Responsible Parties: National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, National Interagency Coordination Center, and Geographic Area Coordination Centers.

Target: June 1, 2015

Action Item #11

Ensure compliance and evaluation of the implementation plan action items. During annual preparedness reviews, review all CAD systems and MAC plans for compliance with the action plans outlined in Action Items #1 through #4.

Responsible Parties: Local Unit FMO and Federal regional/state Fire Management Officer

Target: July 1, 2015

During 2015, 2016, and Beyond

Longer term actions will begin in 2015, with full implementation in subsequent years, to improve program effectiveness, efficiency and reduce costs. These include:

1. Update FMPs to promote protection, conservation, and restoration of sagebrush-steppe and priority greater sage-grouse habitat.
2. Increase the availability of technology and technology transfer to wildland fire managers and resources. Access to real time maps, information, and data increases the success of suppression resources responding to the wildfire threats to priority greater sage-grouse habitat. To increase this availability, agencies should make available the most current hardware and software and increase the rate of radio system upgrades. This action builds on experience gained from implementation of item #9 during the 2015 fire season.

3. Revise the ICS 209 to include specific blocks to collect information about critical resource values threatened, including greater sage-grouse habitat and populations beginning in the 2016 fire season.

7(b) ii. - Prioritization and Allocation of Resources

Issue Description/Overview

Provide clear direction on the prioritization and allocation of fire management resources and assets.

Prioritization and allocation of fire management resources takes place on multiple scales by the “organizational owners⁴” of the resources and assets, both within the individual organizations and in coordination and collaboration with each other. Those organizations prioritize assets and resources prior to incidents through pre-incident response plans (often known as “run cards”), and make determinations to retain certain resources and assets for local use only and identify those available for assignment to other locations. MAC groups, or the equivalent, composed of agency managers, set guidelines and parameters for response (mobilization guides), including priorities and criteria for allocation of resources and assets.

At the national level, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating (NMAC) Group prioritizes allocation of resources and assets among the nine geographic areas, as identified by the [National Interagency Coordination Center](#) (NICC). Geographic Multi-Agency Coordinating (GMACs) Groups prioritize allocation of resources and assets among fires within their respective geographic areas. Overall, agency fire management policies guide priorities for allocation of wildland fire management resources and assets. “Direction to leaders” documents issued by national agency leadership typically set national priorities. Command responsibility for each incident lies with the local line officer or agency administrator, usually through a delegation of authority to an incident commander.

The Order places added emphasis on the need to protect, conserve, and restore the health of sagebrush-steppe ecosystem by emphasizing that this is a critical fire management priority (see [Section 4 of the Order](#)).

Potential challenges and considerations for providing clear direction on prioritization and allocation of fire management resources and assets include:

- Clear understanding of roles and responsibilities at all levels and scales;
- Maintaining national level fire activity situational awareness;
- Clear communication of leadership priorities;
- Communicating fire activities and conditions to agency leadership throughout the fire season;

⁴ Organizational Owner is the organization (Federal, state, or local) that funds the resource

- Adjudicating competing priorities, especially between multiple agencies and levels of government;
- Adjudicating competing strategic priorities for federal fire resources for non-fire emergencies;
- Increased ability to manage the movement and pre-positioning of fire management assets;
- Addressing areas that have no designated fire protection responsibility;
- Strengthening support from Department of Defense (DOD) and international partners; and
- Reduced levels of key assets such as crews and aviation.

Methodology

Actions and recommendations were developed through conversations with the NMAC, with Federal fire leadership in the DOI, the USDA Forest Service (USFS), and with representatives from the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), and representatives from western states.

Actions Underway

A number of actions are underway to address prioritization and allocation of wildland fire management resources:

- Local, unit level reviews of pre-attack dispatch plans and pre-positioning of response resources in coordination with partner and cooperator organizations;
- Revisions and updates to the *National Mobilization Guide* to increase clarity of policies and procedures.

Proposed Actions

Prior to the 2015 Western Fire Season

Further actions, taken prior to the 2015 Western fire season, to provide clear direction on the prioritization and allocation of fire management resources and assets include:

Action Item #1

Communication plan. Establish protocols for providing Federal agency leadership with regular briefings and information on wildfire activity, fire conditions, and significant issues in relation to rangeland fire and the implementation of the Order throughout the 2015 wildfire season in order to provide leadership with an accurate understanding and insight to the conditions on the ground. Senior leadership will regularly communicate national strategic priorities and expectations to line officers and fire staffs during the wildfire season.

Responsibility: National agency fire leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS)

Target: April 1, 2015

Action Item #2

Review and update the delegation of authority for the NMAC Group. Ensure clarity of role, function, responsibility, and accountability, specifically in relation to the policy direction for addressing rangeland fire in the Order.

Responsibility: National agency leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS/NASF)

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #3

Issue a national level “Leaders’ Intent.” Provide expectations, direction, priorities, and objectives for NMAC, GMACs, line officers and fire management staff to include policy articulated in the Order.

Responsibility: National agency leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS/NASF)

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #4

Engage GMAC Groups. Communicate Leaders’ Intent and expectations for prioritization and allocation of fire management resources and assets in relation to rangeland fire.

Responsibility: National agency leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS/NASF)

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #5

Develop “Delegation of Authority” template for use by local line officers. Create standard language for use in a Delegation of Authority template that identifies the sage-steppe ecosystem and protection of species as a priority. Line officers will use this standard template when delegating authority to an Incident Commander who has responsibility for managing a wildfire incident within a FIAT area or has nexus to one.

Responsibility: NMAC

Target: May 1, 2015

Action Item #6

Engage line officers to communicate Leaders’ Intent and expectations. Each agency use appropriate internal mechanisms to communicate intent and expectations to regional and unit level managers.

Responsibility: Federal agency leadership (USFS/DOI Bureaus)

Target: June 1, 2015

During 2015, 2016, and Beyond

Longer-term actions, to begin in 2015 with full implementation in subsequent years, will be taken to improve utilization of fire management resources and assets in relation to rangeland fire and increase efficiency and reduce costs:

1. Reduce administrative barriers (e.g., the lack of a travel credit card for fire crews limits the expeditious assignment and reassignment of fire personnel resources from one incident to another) to the mobility of resources and assets;
2. Enhance predictive services capability to anticipate resource and asset needs;
3. Enhance fire intelligence capability to better plan for and utilize resources and asset;
4. Engage international and Department of Defense (DOD) partners;
5. Improve cooperative agreements between Federal, tribal, and state entities;
6. Better management of radio spectrum;
7. Enhance ability of communities to provide local protection;
8. Address areas without previously defined protection responsibilities;
9. Expand capabilities of tribal, state, and local agencies to provide fire protection; and
10. Develop a mechanism to capture and analyze data regarding wildfire impacts to priority sagebrush-steppe ecosystems.

7(b) v. - Post-Fire Recovery

Issue Description/Overview

Review and update emergency stabilization and burned area rehabilitation policies and programs to integrate with long-term restoration activities.

In order to make progress in post-fire restoration of sage-steppe ecosystems, it is important to focus efforts on areas characterized by high resistance to invasive annual grasses and resilience after disturbance. Identifying geospatially explicit management strategies to limit the likelihood of habitat loss due to fire and target management strategies to improve resilience will further efforts to conserve important sage-grouse habitats. The Emergency Stabilization (ES) and Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR) programs can play an important role in this regard.

ES and BAR funding are two separate Department programs with two distinct purposes, authorities, and budgets. Currently, the ES program undertakes emergency treatments within one year of containment of a wildfire to minimize threats to life or property and to stabilize or prevent unacceptable degradation to natural and cultural resources from the effects of wildfire. Projects may be monitored for up to three years.

The BAR program identifies those areas unlikely to recover naturally from severe wildfire damage and takes actions to initiate the recovery and creation of resilient landscapes and to repair or replace minor assets damaged or destroyed by the wildfire event. Identification and rapid treatment of areas in priority greater sage-grouse habitat that are unlikely to recover naturally are particularly important given the long timeframes often necessary to restore sagebrush steppe and the need to establish native grasses and vegetation in order to prevent invasion by non-native species such as cheatgrass. Treatments funded in BAR may build on ES measures and currently may continue to be implemented for up to three years from containment of the fire. At present, after three years, the bureaus' resource management programs assume responsibility for further landscape restoration and monitoring in accordance with LUPs and bureau mission goals.

The Suppression Operations activity of the Department's Wildland Fire Management appropriation funds the ES program and currently is limited to 10 percent of the 10-year suppression expenditure average. This amount is, at present, allocated to the four wildland fire management bureaus based on the rolling 10-year average of acres burned by each bureau, excluding Alaska. Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) teams complete assessment plans to determine values at risk for priority treatments. Generally, the ES program meets funding needs and availability in most years. However, during extreme fire years, especially in the Great Basin region, ES needs exceeded funding limits.

The BAR program, funded through the BAR sub-activity of the Department's Wildland Fire Management appropriation, and currently, allocated to bureaus on a project-by-project basis uses a standard set of scoring criteria. Generally, the allocation of funds happens shortly after

enactment of appropriations for wildfires that occurred in the previous fiscal year. In some years, available funding is insufficient for qualified projects; and in others, funding exceeds needs. In the latter case, funds are carried forward to be used for future needs. Delays in final appropriations at the beginning of the fiscal year delayed timely funding of projects in some years.

The identified topics affect the ability of the post-fire recovery programs of ES and BAR to support protection, conservation, and restoration of the health of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem.

1. Lack of consistent and explicit linkage between ES treatments, BAR treatments, and efficacy of longer-term restoration treatments;
2. Whether the current ES 10 percent cap is appropriate, and whether an effective fiscally responsible alternative can be offered;
3. The current time limitations of one year for ES and three years for BAR are not based on the ecological or logistical parameters that may be faced in post-fire recovery nor do they necessarily take into consideration natural resource management priorities; therefore, under unusual circumstances, a fiscally responsible extension process should be considered;
4. Fall treatment windows for BAR are missed because of current delays in the prioritization process and in funding availability early in the fiscal year;
5. Fall treatment windows for BAR are missed because of financial management and procurement protocols; and criteria for award of projects does not recognize values at risk and land/resource management priorities.
6. Effectiveness monitoring to determine if treatments succeed in the first year of application or will require multiple-year treatments, including the need for changes in post-fire restoration management practices using an adaptive management approach.

Methodology

The Interior Burned Area Response National Coordinators (IBAER) for the BLM, FWS, National Park Service (NPS), and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) met the first week of February 2015 in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (USFS) National Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (NBAER) coordinator and the Office of Wildland Fire (OWF) liaison to identify, discuss, and develop solutions to ensure ES and BAR policy and programs support the policy objectives of the Order. The NBAER coordinators worked with the (Federal) local units, OWF, Joint Fire Sciences Program (JFSP), USFS research stations, and their natural resource counterparts on short- and long-term post-wildland fire rangeland restoration activities to meet the objectives of the Order, with emphasis on the Great Basin region. Additional outreach to academicians and non-Federal researchers and institutions with experience and expertise in landscape restoration relevant to sagebrush steppe should continue.

Policies and program actions taken for ES and BAR can have significant impacts on the restoration cycle and critical to the potential longer term restoration objectives in the sagebrush steppe. The simultaneous consideration of the long-term strategy and fuels management efforts outlined in the Order will be integral to future policy development. Bureau resource specialists and managers need to participate in these discussions. The Department will initiate a discussion regarding roles and responsibilities for overarching policy in this regard and identify options for future program and project level policy direction in relation to rangeland fire restoration objectives.

Actions Underway

- The Department has a BAR reserve fund of \$1.5 million for the FY 2015 wildfire season to address late season BAR treatments that carry into FY 2016.
- IBAER and the bureaus will incorporate current scientific knowledge into project development and implementation and will communicate science and research information at the NBAER team preseason meeting, trainings, and other venues.

Proposed Actions

Prior to the 2015 Western Wildfire Season

Further actions, taken prior to the 2015 Western fire season, to review and update ES and BAR policies and programs in order to integrate with long-term restoration activities targeted to high priority greater sage-grouse habitat areas in the Great Basin include:

Action Item #1

Review and update ES and BAR policy guidance to address rating and evaluation criteria, project design to promote the likelihood of treatment success, cost containment, monitoring, and continuity and transition to long- term restoration activities and treatments.

- *BAR evaluation and rating criteria.* Update the criteria for the 2015 fire season allocation to reflect the provisions of the Order to fund projects on a priority basis and applied without regard to individual agency mission or bureau fixed funding percentage. Spell out in the updated criteria Departmental expectations at the program level and prioritize funding for BAR projects that include management commitments for continued treatments after three years, using funds from non-fire bureau programs to ensure the accomplishment of long term recovery objectives. Where appropriate, project design should include FIAT scientific criteria in the project decision processes to ensure consideration for treatment and funding of the most viable projects and with added consideration to the restoration of areas identified in RMPs as sage grouse focal areas and/or priority greater sage-grouse habitat.

- *Review ES policy and procedures.* Issues included for review: developing an exception process, in conjunction with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), to allow funding beyond 1 year of containment for high priority treatments; procedures for exceeding the current 10 percent ES Authority Level; developing criteria for performance objectives that account for probability of success; and include FIAT scientific criteria in the project design to ensure that the most viable projects are approved.

Responsibility: I-BAER/OWF/IFEC/FEC/Federal Fire Policy Council

Target: June 1, 2015

Action Item #2

Address acquisition, financial management, and other procedures that pose challenges to timely project implementation. Work with Departmental and bureau acquisition and finance offices to provide funding and project continuity at the beginning of, and across, fiscal years.

Responsibility: OWF/Bureau designated representatives

Target: July 1, 2015

Action Item #3

Accelerate schedule approving BAR projects consistent with the guidelines established for the 2015 fire season. In conjunction with the review of the ES and BAR policy and program priorities (Action item #1 above), accelerate preliminary approvals that will allow sufficient lead time to complete cultural and other clearances (e.g., National Environmental Protection Act [NEPA]⁵ and National Preservation Act of 1966 [Section 106]⁶), procurement planning, and other advance work that will take place prior to the application of full funding at the beginning of the fiscal year. This new schedule will be used for 2015 fires.

Responsibility: IBAER/DOI Bureaus

Target: June 1, 2015

Action Item #4

Identify non-fire programs and activities that will fund treatments and restoration activities for the long term in conjunction with BAR and ES policy and program review to be conducted in 2015. Funding of ES and BAR projects will be evaluated based on opportunities and commitments from non-fire program and activities if the work that is proposed will extend

⁵ The purpose of NEPA is to ensure that environmental factors are weighted equally when compared to other factors in the decision-making process undertaken by Federal agencies. The Act establishes the national environmental policy, including a multidisciplinary approach to considering environmental effects in Federal Government agency decision-making.

⁶ Section 106 requires Federal agencies to consider the effects of projects they carry out, approve, or fund on historic properties.

beyond the ES and BAR duration. This requirement is necessary for long-term success as noted in Action Item #1.

Responsibility: All affected DOI Bureaus

Target: June 1, 2015

Action Item #5

Identify requirements for National Fire Plan Operations and Reporting System (NFPORS) capabilities. Implementation of new criteria for project evaluation and oversight may require updates and changes to NFPORS.

Responsibility: IBAER/DOI Bureaus

Target: June 1, 2015

During 2015, 2016, and Beyond

Longer term actions will begin in 2015, with full implementation in subsequent years to improve program effectiveness, efficiency and reduce costs:

1. Work with tribal and agency plant material specialist to improve efficiencies in rangeland seeding operations for ES and BAR.
2. Beginning in 2015, conduct an in-depth assessment to determine how to integrate, ES, BAR, and restoration programs and develop processes for long term restoration commitment and maintenance of the local unit for ES and BAR treatments.
3. Work with the science and research community to investigate and improve the effectiveness of post-wildland fire protection, conservation, and restoration treatments, incorporating traditional ecological knowledge.
4. Expand efforts to utilize native and non-native seed and vegetation plantings, where appropriate, to accelerate efforts to improve and restore post-fire rangeland health.

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7(b) ix. - Seed Strategy

Issue Description/Overview

Develop a comprehensive strategy for acquisition, storage, and distribution of seeds and other plant materials.

Native plant communities, especially those containing forbs essential to ecosystem integrity and diversity, provide ecosystem services that sustain wildlife, such as greater sage-grouse and native pollinators. The spread of invasive species, altered wildfire regimes, habitat fragmentation, and climate change negatively affected many native plant communities and the species that depend upon them. To slow and ultimately reverse these trends in the greater sage-grouse habitat areas requires, a reliable supply of genetically appropriate and locally adapted seed, as well as seeding technology and equipment for successful and expanded effective restoration of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem.

Methodology

The National Seed Strategy is being developed by the interagency Plant Conservation Alliance (PCA), with BLM as the lead and representation from 11 additional Federal agencies (BIA, NPS, USGS, FWS, Federal Highway Administration [FHA], Smithsonian Institution, U.S. Botanical Garden, USDA Agricultural Research Service [ARS], USFS, USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], and USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service [NRCS]), multiple state, and non-governmental organizations. Drafting teams, formed by PCA Federal committee members, released the draft to the Western Governors' Association, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), and the Plant Conservation Non-Federal Committee. Under the coordination of the Plant Conservation Alliance Federal and non-Federal committees, identified working groups will carry out the implementation plan and resolve issues that arise.

Actions Underway

Together, the BLM, Federal, non-Federal, and state partners work to develop the National Seed Strategy and associated implementation plan for 2015-2020. The National Seed Strategy aims to provide land management agencies the tools required to facilitate ecological restoration across the United States, including acquisition, storage, and distribution of native seed and other plant materials, as well as address the propagation and conservation of culturally important species. Implementation of the National Seed Strategy will enhance coordination across agencies and forge vital partnerships among agencies, states, tribes, non-governmental organizations, and the private seed and nursery industry required to restoring healthy, functioning ecosystems. The Great Basin Consortium Annual Meeting, held in February 2015, devoted a full day for Great Basin Native Plant Project (GBNPP) cooperator presentations to discuss and highlight current native seed and restoration techniques and research with a focus on dry site restoration and environmental change.

Proposed Actions

Prior to the 2015 Western Wildfire Season

Action Item #1

Develop the draft National Seed Strategy and Implementation Plan (2015 – 2020) to:

- Identify seed needs and ensure the supply of genetically appropriate and locally adapted seed;
- Identify research needs to develop seed and improve technology for production and ecological restoration;
- Develop decision tools for managers; and
- Communicate appropriate seed use to agency personnel.

Responsible Parties: BLM (lead agency), BIA, FHA, USFS, FWS, NPS, ARS, NRCS, NIFA, and USGS

Target: April 2015

Action Item #2

Identify a forum to discuss and highlight current native seed and restoration techniques and research. Attend the Institute for Applied Ecology's National Native Seed Conference.

Responsible Party: BLM and USFS

Target: April 2015

Action Item #3

Provide an opportunity to discuss current research, case-studies, and tools that inform applied restoration opportunities in the Great Basin. A series of 15 webinars on seeding and restoration entitled, "The Right Seed in the Right Place at the Right Time: Tools for Sustainable Restoration" are offered through May 2015.

Responsible Parties: BLM and USFS GBNPP, Society for Ecological Restoration, and Fire Science Exchange

Target: May 2015

During 2015, 2016, and Beyond

Longer term actions will begin in 2015, with full implementation in subsequent years, to improve program effectiveness, efficiency and reduce costs:

1. Complete and issue the National Seed Strategy and Implementation Plan (2015 – 2020) to increase production, storage capacity, acquisition, and use of genetically appropriate and locally adapted seed. Solicit research proposals to help implement the National Seed Strategy.

2. Provide useful information for managers when making decisions about the selection of genetically appropriate plant materials and technologies for vegetation restoration, including addressing the propagation and conservation of culturally important (first food) species.
3. Develop commercial seed for long-term conservation for future climates. Collect native seed from across the distribution of the species for use in developing commercial seed and for long-term seed banking to ensure conservation of germplasm for future climates.
4. Establish pilot projects that will serve as training/demonstration sites on planting native seed species, with monitoring to determine the effectiveness of the restoration techniques.
5. Develop a Business Plan for the National Seed Strategy. Identify funding sources and processes necessary to implement the National Seed Strategy.
6. Develop an interagency budget initiative for FY 2017. Work across agencies and Departments to initiate an interagency budget initiative for funds to implement the National Seed Strategy.
7. Produce 100,000 sagebrush seedlings annually for greater sage-grouse habitat restoration through the Sagebrush Grow Out program (seedlings grown for planting in wildfire burned areas or restoration areas to establish native plant communities), in five Great Basin prisons.
8. Coordinate and collaborate across agencies on current and future climate trend data. Understand the trends in climate, across the Western United States with a focus on sagebrush-steppe and pinyon/juniper ecosystems.
9. Increase the availability of native seed for the Great Basin. Increase the grow-out of native plant species for the restoration of the sagebrush-steppe ecosystem within the Great Basin, which will provide necessary structure and habitat, as well as dietary, and other benefits for the greater sage-grouse.

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Summary

The time to address the threats to sagebrush-steppe ecosystem, habitat for the greater sage-grouse and associated wildlife species, and the many communities that call this region home is now—not in 5 or 10 years, when the West is more fragmented, wildfires are more intense, or invasive species have gained more ground. The Order sets in motion options to enhance the protection, conservation, and restoration of a healthy sagebrush-steppe ecosystem in the Great Basin, and addresses important public safety, economic, cultural, and social concerns. This Initial Report, compiled by four interagency task groups to identify immediate actions we can take prior to the 2015 Western wildfire season, is just the first step. In the coming months, nine interagency task groups will work collaboratively with other Federal, tribal, state, and local governmental partners and stakeholders to identify longer-term actions and activities to further meet the intent of the Order. These actions will help to ensure the allocation of fire management resources and assets before, during, and after wildland fire incidents and investments related to restoration activities, reflect this critical priority.

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Appendix A – Initial Report Action Item Table

Action Item	Responsible Party/Parties	Target Date
Develop and share a geospatial tool that highlights areas of concern in the Great Basin and includes, at a minimum, focal, Fire and Invasives Assessment Tool (FIAT) and Priority Habitat Management areas.	BLM/USGS	May 1, 2015
7(b) i – Integrated Response Plans		
#1. Increase the capabilities of rural/volunteer fire departments and RFPAs and enhance the development and use of veterans crews.	OWF/Agency Fire Leadership	June 1, 2015
#2. Ensure local, MAC groups are functional and MAC plans are updated.	MAC groups working with local Federal wildland fire suppression agencies, tribes state fire suppression agencies, RFPAs, local fire departments, and other cooperators	May 1, 2015
#3. Develop and implement minimum draw-down level and step up plans to ensure availability of resources for protection in priority greater sage-grouse habitat.	Federal local unit FMOs, in coordination with cooperators and reviewed by Federal state/regional FMOs	May 1, 2015
#4. Apply a coordinated risk-based approach to wildfire response to assure initial attack response to priority areas.	Local MAC groups and unit FMOs, with review by Federal regional/state FMOs	May 1, 2015
#5. Develop a standardized set of briefing materials.	Geographic Area Coordinating Groups (GACGs) and local MACs	May 1, 2015
#6. Review/update local plans and agreements for consistency and currency to ensure initial attack response to priority greater sage-grouse areas.	Federal local unit FMOs in coordination with cooperators and with review by Federal regional/state FMOs	May 15, 2015
#7. Develop supplemental guidance for use of “severity funding.”	DOI OWF in coordination with BLM	May 15, 2015
#8. Evaluate the effectiveness of action plans.	DOIOWF and Federal Agency Fire Directors	May 30, 2015

Action Item	Responsible Party/Parties	Target Date
#9. Increase the availability of technology and technology transfer to fire management managers and suppression resources.	DOI national bureau leadership; DOI state/ regional and local unit managers	June 1, 2015
#10. Improve the description and awareness of critical resource values threatened in various stages of the fire response process including large fire management.	NMAC Group, National Interagency Coordination Center, and Geographic Area Coordination Centers	June 1, 2015
#11. Ensure compliance and evaluation of the implementation plan action items.	Local Unit FMO and Federal regional/ state FMOs.	July 1, 2015

7(b) ii – Prioritization and Allocation of Resources

#1. Communication Plan	National Agency Fire Leadership (DOI Bureaus and USFS)	April 1, 2015
#2. Review and update the delegation of authority for the NMAC Group.	National agency leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS/NASF)	May 1, 2015
#3. Issue national level “Leaders’ Intent.”	National agency leadership (DOI Bureaus/USFS/NASF)	May 1, 2015
#4. Engage GMAC Groups.	National agency leadership (DOI/USFS/NASF)	May 1, 2015
#5. Develop “Delegation of Authority” template for use by local line officers.	NMAC	May 1, 2015
#6. Engage line officers to communicate Leaders’ Intent and expectations.	Federal agency leadership (USFS/DOI Bureaus)	June 1, 2015

7(b) v – Post-Fire Recovery

#1. Review and update ES and BAR policy guidance to address rating and evaluation criteria, project design to promote the likelihood of treatment success, cost containment, monitoring, and continuity	I-BAER/OWF/IFEC/FEC/Federal Fire Policy Council	June 1, 2015
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Action Item	Responsible Party/Parties	Target Date
and transition to long- term restoration activities and treatments.		
#2. Address acquisition, financial management, and other procedures that pose challenges to timely project implementation.	OWF/Bureau Designated Representatives	July 1, 2015
#3. Accelerate schedule approving BAR projects consistent with the guidelines established for the 2015 fire season.	IBAER/DOI Bureaus	June 1, 2015
#4. Identify non-fire programs and activities that will fund treatments and restoration activities for the long term in conjunction with BAR and ES policy and program review to be conducted in 2015.	All Affected DOI Bureaus	June 1, 2015
#5. Identify requirements for NFPORS capabilities.	IBEAR/DOI Bureau	June 1, 2015
7(b) ix – Seed Strategy		
#1. Develop the draft National Seed Strategy and Implementation Plan (2015 – 2020)	BLM (lead agency) BIA, FHA, USFS, FWS, NPS, ARS, NRCS, NIFA, and USGS (support agencies)	April 2015
#2. Identify a forum to discuss and highlight current native seed and restoration techniques and research.	BLM and USFS	April 2015
#3. Provide an opportunity to discuss current research, case-studies, and tools that inform applied restoration opportunities in the Great Basin.	BLM and USFS Great Basin Native Plant Project, Society for Ecological Restoration, and Fire Science Exchange	May 2015

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Appendix B – Glossary of Terms

Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAR)

The post-fire activities prescribed and implemented to rehabilitate and restore fire damaged lands.

Draw Down Level

The minimum level of personnel and equipment resources needed (at either the local or national level) without compromising response capability.

Emergency Stabilization (ES)

Planned actions to stabilize and prevent unacceptable degradation to natural and cultural resources, to minimize threats to life or property resulting from the effects of a fire, or to repair/replace/construct physical improvements necessary to prevent degradation of land or resources.

Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (MAC Group)

A national, regional, or local management group for interagency planning, coordination, and operations leadership for incidents. Provides an essential management mechanism for strategic coordination to ensure incident resources are efficiently and appropriately managed in a cost-effective manner.

National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)

The purpose of NEPA is to ensure that environmental factors are weighted equally when compared to other factors in the decision-making process undertaken by Federal agencies. The Act establishes the national environmental policy, including a multidisciplinary approach to considering environmental effects in Federal Government agency decision-making.

Organizational Owner

Organization owner is the organization (Federal, state, or local) that funds the resource or resources.

Rangeland Fire

Any wildfire located on rangelands.

Section 106

Requires Federal agencies to consider the effects of projects they carryout, approve, or fund on historic properties.

Severity Funding

Suppression funds used to increase the level of pre-suppression capability and fire preparedness when predicted or actual burning conditions exceed those normally expected, due to severe weather conditions.

Step Up Plans

Step up plans (also called staffing plans) are designed to direct incremental preparedness actions in response to increased fire danger.

Wildfire

An unplanned, unwanted wildfire including unauthorized human-caused fires, escaped planned fire events, and all other wildland fires where the objective is to put the fire out.

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