Success Stories from the Western Region

Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Fire Program

The Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness (SBW) is located in north central Idaho and partly in western Montana and is approximately 1,342,502 acres in size. Three National Forests (Bitterroot, Lolo, and Nez Perce-Clearwater) are responsible for the management of the SBW. Geographically, the SBW is dominated by the Bitterroot Mountains on the east, the Selway River Basin and Clearwater Mountain Range in the central/southern portions, and the Clearwater Mountains and Lochsa River drainage in the northwestern portion of the SBW.

The original decision authority for allowing lightning-caused fires to play, as nearly as possible, their natural ecological role in wilderness in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness was approved by the Chief of the Forest Service in 1972 within the White Cap drainage on the Bitterroot National Forest. At that time, the decision could not be appealed. Subsequently, in 1976, a Final Environmental Statement decision document was prepared titled Fire Management in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness – A proposed policy change – Bitterroot, Clearwater, Lolo, and Nez Perce National Forests – Northern Region and was approved by the Northern Region - Regional Forester. This decision was also not able to be appealed. Later, in 1986-1987, Land and Resource Management Plans were approved for all of the National Forests (Bitterroot, Lolo, Clearwater, and Nez Perce) in which the SBW lies, to allow lightning-caused fires to play their natural role in the management areas within the SBW. These LRMP's could be appealed but there is no history of litigation in allowing lightning-caused fires to play their natural ecological role in the SBW.

Prior to its use as a pilot area for the fire use program, naturally ignited fires were suppressed much as they were in the rest of the country because fire was seen as a destructive force with no recognized benefits. As the federal agencies have had more opportunity to study the process of fire they have come to realize that not only does fire have ecological benefits but is absolutely necessary for

2007 Bridge Wildland fire use event on the Powell RD, Clearwater NF.

Burning in dead and dying lodgepole pine beetle infested forest within the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. The Bridge fire burned a total of approximately 42,000 acres, all within the wilderness over about a 60 day period

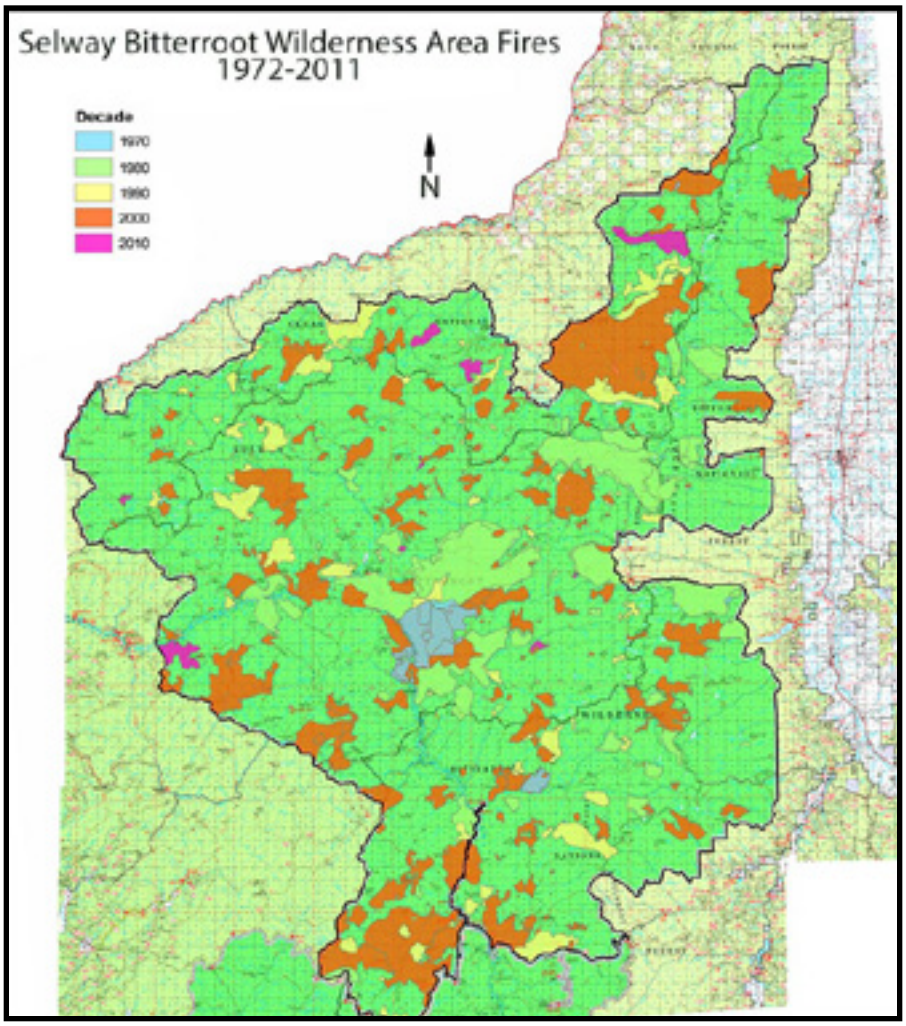
For more information about the fire management program in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and surrounding non-wilderness lands, contact:

The Bitterroot NF at: www.fs.usda.gov/bitterroot

The Lolo NF at: www.fs.usda.gov/lolo

The Nez Perce-Clearwater NF at: www.fs.usda.gov/nezperce or www.fs.usda.gov/clearwater.

the maintenance of many plant and animal species. Federal wildland fire agencies have since recognized the importance of fire as a natural ecosystem process. Today, unplanned ignitions are often allowed to burn within the boundaries of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, although if a threat is perceived to values outside the wilderness, fires starting within the wilderness will be confined to the wilderness.



Currently, the Forest Supervisor on each forest that manages the SBW has the decision authority to allow a lightning-caused fire to play its natural ecological role within the SBW. Depending on their qualifications and experience, some District Rangers are also allowed this decision authority.

The most important contributions to the success of the fire use program are threefold; 1) allowing fire to return to the wilderness ecosystem to accomplish the restoration and maintenance of resilient landscapes on a much larger scale than prior to this proposal; 2) this proposal has contributed to and increased the safety of firefighting resources by reducing exposure of firefighting resources on fires that were much lower priority to suppress than fires where values of life and property were much higher; 3) this proposal has reduced, over the past 40 years, the size and intensity of future fires in the SBW thus have accomplished a self-regulating ecosystem when new fires burn into older fire areas. An example of this was in 2007 when the Bridge fire on the Powell Ranger District of the Clearwater National Forest was confined on the north and south perimeters by previous burned areas that occurred in the early and late 1990's. The map of the fire history in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness below shows many examples where this occurred on other fires.

When the proposal first began in 1972, the agency did not think about how well allowing these fires to play their role would regulate the size and intensity of future fires over the long-term. It was important initially to meet the objective of allowing natural fires to burn within the natural landscape of a wilderness that is supposed to, by law (1964 Wilderness Act), be primarily affected by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable. Even though the Act went on to say such measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire, it was important to note that the suppression of lightning-caused fires were having a negative impact on the wilderness ecosystem, not only from a natural ecosystem restoration/maintenance perspective but from the impact that suppression activities were having on the natural environment. The 40-year history of fire use in the SBW has confirmed its ecological benefits. The use of fire to meet resource benefit objectives is clearly doing what it is supposed to do: restoring fire as a natural process and mitigating hazardous fire conditions resulting from past fire exclusion.

2005 Rockin Fire, Bitterroot NF, Darby RD, Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness

It has been found that the long-term benefits of allowing fire to meet resource benefit objectives reduces the negative fire effects of the second entry fires years after the first fire burned an area. This helps fire managers better anticipate the spread, intensity, and effects of future fires, thus improving the ability to manage wildland fires to achieve resource benefits in the future.

"What's happening is that these past fires are regulating the growth of future fires, so that fire behavior becomes much more benign," says Bob Mutch, a retired fire researcher who assisted in developing the Forest Service's first WFU program. "When a new fire starts, it burns into old fires and becomes self-regulating." The landscape, he says, becomes what fire ecologist Penny Morgan has called "fire-smart." Says Mutch: "I think that's a most appropriate description. The landscape adapts [to repeated WFU fires] in such a way that smart things happen—smart for the ecosystem and smart for society." The Wilderness Act of 1964, called for managing wilderness areas for their natural qualities, says Mutch, "but one of the most unnatural acts we'd been committing in the wild all these years was suppression of fire."

The Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy directs managers to allow lightning-caused fires to play, as nearly as possible, their natural ecological role. Accordingly, today's Federal Wildland Fire Policy allows wildland fire to be managed under multiple objectives to meet protection and resource benefit objectives. This policy has been successfully expanded and implemented in many national parks, many wilderness areas administered by federal agencies, and in areas outside wilderness.

In summary, the SBW wilderness fire program has been a successful model that can be relied upon by others who are considering using wildland fire to meet resource benefit objectives. The fire suppression paradigm is changing mainly due to the issues surrounding firefighter safety, the high costs associated with fully suppressing a fire (especially in remote, inaccessible areas), and the higher spread rates-intensities-and fire sizes that are being experienced today that have not been witnessed in the recent past. Managing wildland fires is a challenging world with emphasis on protecting important values at risk (life, private property, structures, forests managed for income, etc.) "We can keep pouring money on large fires if we want," says Tom Nichols, Fire Manager for the National Park Service. "But we have to think in terms of the future. It may feel safer to put the fire out now. But that just means someone else will inherit the problem down the road."

Four different Wildland Fire Use fires on the West Fork Ranger District, Hells Half Lookout, Bitterroot National Forest during the 2005 fire season. This Ranger District was managing 38 other WFU fires at this time.

Actions highlighted in the Western Region that are identified in the successful SBW fire management program are:

Goal #1: Restoring and Maintaining Resilient Landscapes

- Objective: Actively manage the land to achieve healthy forest and rangeland conditions.
- Contribute to the restoration and maintenance of biodiversity, desired species (including threatened, endangered, and proposed listed species) and their habitat.
- Manage to achieve resilient conditions at large landscape scales, considering natural fire regimes, seasonality, and traditional ecological management of the land.
- Use wildland fire as a critical cultural and ecological process in areas where its use is specified in land, resource, and fire management plans.
- Recognize and communicate priority natural landscapes as functioning ecological systems where wildland fire is an essential component and minimal suppression activities will occur.
- Reduce the risk of uncharacteristic and damaging wildland fire.
- Identify and prioritize high risk, high value areas (e.g., watersheds, riparian areas, plant and animal habitat, forest structure, high investment areas) for protection and restoration.
- Emphasize restoration of forests and rangelands at large landscape scales with a priority focus on the “middle ground”.
- Encourage strategic investments in prescribed fire, unplanned ignitions, and other tools to achieve restoration objectives and avoid transferring risk to other jurisdictions and less resilient landscapes.

Goal #2: Creating Fire-adapted Communities

- Plan and train for a wide variety of events, including wildfire, and response options.
- Maintain and improve intergovernmental understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each agency to inform land, resource, and fire management decisions.
- Develop a means and process for rural communities that adjoin public lands to partner in wildland fire planning, preparedness, response and recovery capabilities.

Goal #3: Responding to Wildfires

- Ensure effective communication among all responders.
- Develop and act on a common vision of risk management among, community leaders, states and federal agency officials using shared decision support tools.
- Avoid management decisions that unconsciously transfer risk or increase threats to other ownerships without dialog and shared understanding.
- Promote realignment of protection responsibilities to the organization that is best suited and prepared to provide wildfire protection cost-effectively, while retaining jurisdictional authorities (e.g., block protection areas, offset protection agreements, protection contracts).
- Strategically align resources (personnel and equipment) across jurisdictions by maximizing situational preparedness using predictive services capabilities and other tools.
- Developing decision support systems that incorporate local and traditional knowledge of fire occurrence, extent, intensity, duration, seasonality, and return intervals.
- Using a strategic management response that addresses preparedness, response, post-fire recovery, and landscape restoration.

Pinchot Fire on the Moose Creek RD, Nez Perce NF. Fires in past years limited spread and intensity on this fire that started in July. Old fire mosaics can be seen surrounding this fire.