

HEALTHY AND RESILIENT FORESTS

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Montana/Dakotas forests have undergone radical changes during the last century due to the suppression of wildland fires and low levels of active forest management. Frequent, low-intensity fires play an important role in promoting and maintaining healthy and resilient forest systems. Natural fires promote natural plant succession cycles.

Today, our forests are unnaturally dense, and forest ecosystem health has suffered significantly. When our forests are combined with continued drought and excessive fuel buildup, these forests are vulnerable to unnaturally severe (catastrophic) wildland fires. Insect attacks have moved from natural endemic levels to epidemic proportions, further stressing our forested systems. This is a downward spiral that desperately needs to be changed.

ISSUES:

The National Fire Plan, which was adopted in May 2002 by federal agencies and western governors in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, prescribed burns, and forest restoration projects.

President Bush announced the *Healthy Forests Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities*, known as the Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI), in August 2002. The HFI focuses on improving regulatory processes and looking for legislative actions to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health.

In February 2003, P.L. 105-277 was amended (P.L. 108-7) in order to provide Stewardship End Result Contracting authority to the BLM. This tool provides the BLM with a mechanism to apply the values of timber and other forest products as an offset against the cost of services received on an approved stewardship project. It also provides an opportunity for multi-party monitoring on the use of the contracting authority.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) (P.L. 108-48) was signed into law by President Bush in December 2003. Its purposes are to: reduce the risks of damage to communities, municipal water supplies and federal lands from catastrophic wildfire; authorize grant programs to improve the commercial value of forest biomass; enhance efforts to protect watersheds and address threats to forest and rangeland health; promote systematic information gathering to address the impacts of insect infestation on forest and rangeland health; improve the capacity to detect insect and disease infestations at an early stage; to benefit threatened and endangered species; improve biological diversity; and enhance carbon sequestration.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The director supports efforts to streamline the process required to restore the health and resiliency to our public land forests. These efforts will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public participation while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. This will preserve the principle of partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes that include all stakeholders and partners at the local level.

The Montana/Dakotas BLM has been using the new tools made available to us through passage of these laws and initiatives. These include the hazardous fuel reduction categorical exclusion, expedited environmental assessments (EAs), and stewardship contracting authority. These tools have been applied, as appropriate, along with our standard project implementation procedures. Several field office projects have utilized the hazardous fuel reduction categorical exclusion and expedited EA process. Since the authorization of BLM's stewardship contracting authority in 2003, 30 projects have used the stewardship contracting authority.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high, and is expected to remain high, as the efforts to restore forest health and resiliency on public lands moves forward. There is much support for measures outlined in the laws and initiatives, but there is also much special interest opposition.

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