
U.S. FOREST SERVICE

WildEarth Guardians: Wildfire Position

Wildfires are as much a part of the American West as wind, sun, rain, and snow. Fire is an essential and natural process that has shaped ecosystems over millennia. The aspen groves in the Rocky Mountains, the vast lodgepole pine forests of Yellowstone, the shortgrass prairies of the Great Plains, and the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest were all born of fire.

Unfortunately, wildfires in some places are now burning faster and hotter compared with what has historically occurred. The causes are numerous and include industrial fire suppression; logging of large, fire-adapted trees and other extractive uses; overgrazing by domestic livestock; elimination of Indigenous burning practices; and roadbuilding. But the overarching factor is undoubtedly the climate crisis. The exacerbating influence of megadroughts, record high temperatures, and changing weather patterns—including more high wind "Red Flag Warning" days—in addition to past and ongoing mismanagement has weakened the natural resiliency of many ecosystems.

Altogether, wildfires increasingly threaten communities, as unmanaged development expands into the amorphous "wildland-urban interface" within and adjacent to fire-dependent landscapes. In fact, development has led to an explosion of homes within so-called "fire zones," which federal and state land management agencies continuously redefine. The unsurprising result is that human-caused ignitions are now the primary cause of all wildfires in the United States and the main reason why communities are at such high risk.

CHAD HARDER

Example of "fuel reduction" on the Bitterroot National Forest in Montana from a "restoration" project.

As the nation witnessed many times in recent years—such as the December 30, 2021 grassfire in Colorado that destroyed over 1,000 homes and businesses in hours, or the 2017 Napa Valley fires that destroyed more than 5,600

HOME IGNITION ZONE CHECKLIST

Simple Steps from Roof to Foundation to Make a Home Safer from Embers and Radiant Heat

- ❑ Clean roofs and gutters of dead leaves, debris and pine needles that could catch embers
- ❑ Replace or repair any loose or missing shingles or roof tiles to prevent ember penetration
- ❑ Reduce embers that could pass through vents in the eaves by installing 1/8 inch metal mesh screening
- ❑ Clean debris from exterior attic vents and install 1/8 inch metal mesh screening to reduce embers
- ❑ Repair or replace damaged or loose window screens and any broken windows
- ❑ Screen or box-in areas below patios and decks with wire mesh to prevent debris and combustible materials from accumulating
- ❑ Move any flammable material away from wall exteriors—mulch, flammable plants, leaves and needles, firewood piles—anything that can burn
- ❑ Remove anything stored underneath decks or porches

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Based on image by NFPA, with funding from USDA Forest Service

structures— human-caused ignitions, prolonged drought, high winds, and a lack of "Firewise" preparations are a potent—and often deadly—combination. Yet, fire scientists and researchers have found that by taking simple actions within the "home ignition zone"—the home and everything around it, up to 100 feet from the foundation—we can save homes and lives and protect firefighters and emergency responders. These are all compelling reasons to redirect funding to support home and community protection while we work with fire across the landscape to maximize the ecosystem benefits it provides.

For over a century, exploitative industries shaped the policies of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Bureau of Land Management, and other public land management agencies, impacting ecosystem integrity and fire regimes. While the timber industry and some politicians claim we can protect homes and communities from wildfire by increasing logging on public lands, the underlying science is hardly settled and remains controversial. Focusing on fire-risk reduction in national forests fails to acknowledge research that shows most wildfires start on private property before crossing public land boundaries.

Moreover, many of the forest and grassland ecosystems we know and love have been "managed" out of their natural wild state for decades. Projects seeking to emulate wildfire's beneficial effects without restoring natural fire regimes create a cycle of perpetual mismanagement that harms the ecological complexity and inherent wildness of ecosystems. That is why we must end the commercialized pseudo-restoration that federal agencies use to meet mandated timber targets under the guise of preventing and controlling wildfires. In addition, we must reduce the number of human-caused ignitions, particularly those from power lines, road use, and poorly managed recreation.

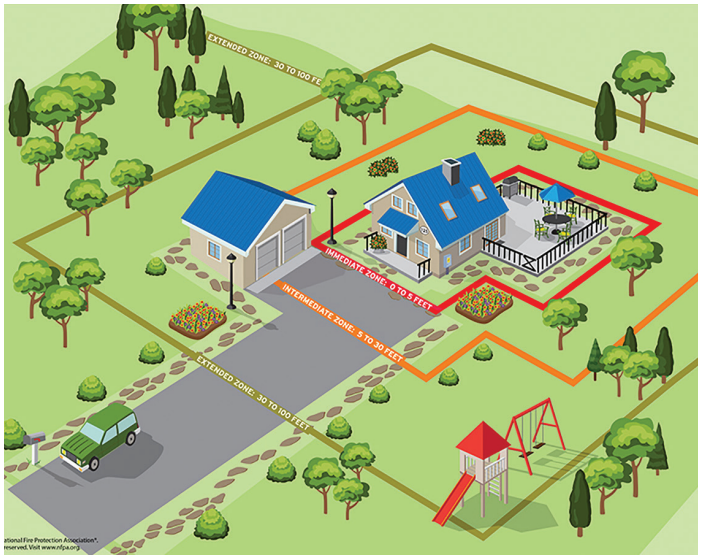
For these reasons, we believe a major shift in national wildfire policies is absolutely crucial. Not only to recognize the crucial ecosystem benefits wildfire provides, but also to help communities adapt to living with, and recovering from, wildfires.

WildEarth Guardians believes in the value of ecosystems and their inherent right to exist and thrive. We recognize the following:

- Wildfire is a unique, essential, and natural process.
- Wildfires of mixed intensities help maintain ecosystem integrity and diversity of natural habitats across vast landscapes.
- Wildfire regimes across the American West are diverse and ecosystem dependent, making management acutely nuanced.
- Natural ecosystems are uniquely adapted to and require fire for self-maintenance. We cannot effectively mimic or replicate the benefits fire provides.
- Intervention with logging and aggressive fire suppression (especially when fires are not threatening homes) often damages the wild places we seek to protect or restore.
- We must work with fire and ensure it can serve its proper ecological role to the greatest extent possible.

Thus, WildEarth Guardians will be a force for:

- **Focusing resources where they can protect life and property.** To reduce loss of homes and lives, we urge elected officials and other decision makers to prioritize the following:
  - Municipalities must manage development within fire-prone areas and pass fire-adapted building codes and zoning regulations that reduce structural ignition risk and make buildings safer for firefighters.
  - Utility companies must reduce the ignition risk created by their infrastructure as 97% of all fires that threaten homes are human-caused. Negligence is costing billions of tax dollars and endangering communities and firefighters.
  - Funding must be increased to model active fire behavior, climate, and landscape interactions in order to better support wildland fire use and improve the allocation of resources when fire suppression is absolutely necessary.
  - Federal and state fire management officials must stop putting firefighters in danger to suppress wildfires that are far from communities and homes. Funding for these efforts should be redirected to establishing fire-resistant communities and to create incentive programs that encourage people to implement "Firewise" measures around their homes and other structures.
- **Ending the greenwashing of logging.** No amount of logging, thinning, or other "forest management" is going to stop the underlying drivers of recent wildfires: a legacy of fire suppression and unprecedented drought and extreme temperatures brought on by the climate crisis. We must broaden acceptance of the natural, necessary, and diverse fire regimes in Western ecosystems, while eliminating the commercial drivers of logging for the sake of fire management.
- **Stopping Logging without Laws.** We must *cease* land management agency policies that:
  - suspend environmental safeguards and green-light projects that lack ecosystem integrity standards and guidelines in the name of wildfire prevention;
  - allow clear-cutting huge swaths of forests in an attempt to emulate wildfire effects or artificially create forest diversity;
  - facilitate building new roads into the backcountry and open outdated roads for commercial logging in the name of "restoration";



NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATION

  - allow an increase in the diameter of trees (which are the most fire-resistant and ecologically important elements of forests) that can be cut just to help make projects commercially viable;
  - allow logging of ancient forests and old-growth trees that store vast amounts of carbon and serve as a powerful climate solution while also providing unique and critical habitat for at-risk fish and wildlife; and
  - permit post-fire salvage logging.
- **Promoting an improved understanding of the role of wildfire on the Western landscape.** We must actively combat the false narratives around fire and forests by:
  - amplifying the voices of scientists studying the spectrum of natural processes impacted by wildfire and forest management;
  - ending the use of medicalized language like "healthy forests" that characterizes forests as unhealthy and in need of "treatments" that follow specific "prescriptions";
  - reforming the Tribal consultation process to mandate collaborative and pre-decisional input from Tribes around cultural burning practices, while guarding against cultural appropriation that cites historical practices to support intensive, perpetual management by federal agencies; and
  - educating local, regional, and national media, elected officials, and community leaders on the importance and benefits of wildfire as an ecosystem process, and on what steps must be taken to protect forest ecosystems from logging and communities from wildfires.

FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER AND ALPHA 1 PHOTOGRAPHY

View of "fuel reduction" logging in the West Fork Crooked River Roadless Area on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest in Idaho. The U.S. Forest Service prescribed shelterwood logging—closely resembling a clearcut—under the guise of reducing wildfire risk to the former mining town of Orogrande, which includes roughly 20 cabins and homes, most of which are only occupied seasonally.

WE RECOGNIZE there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Nonetheless, constraining wildfires and attempting to mimic their benefits through "management" across entire landscapes creates artificial conditions on a massive scale that invite unintended consequences and overlook the complexity of these ecosystems. Fire suppression and fire deficits—combined with climate change, record-setting heat waves, and prolonged drought—increase the potential for large-scale fire events.

WE NEED institutional reform of fire management systems, including independent, ecologically minded fire managers and scientists with the autonomy and authority to inform federal agency fire policy.

WE MUST better prepare and protect all Western communities by focusing the majority of fire-fighting resources within the "home ignition zone."

WE MUST protect homes, communities, and businesses through appropriate zoning, investments in ignition-risk reduction, and public education.

WE NEED proactive federal funding for all of this.

ULTIMATELY, WE MUST ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES of the climate crisis and stop the extraction and burning of fossil fuels that are causing climate chaos and weakening the resiliency of ecosystems in order to restore balance and dynamism to fire-adapted ecosystems throughout the American West.

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