FUSEE Position Paper

Wildland Fire Use

· Fire is an essential, natural process on much public land, where natural ignition sources, like lightning, are abundant. Over the past century, fire suppression has altered historic fire cycles, leading to a dangerous build-up of vegetation in our wildlands.

· One way for land management agencies to restore healthy conditions and protect communities is to take advantage of some natural fires. Wildland fire use projects are lightning-caused fires that are allowed to burn and spread naturally when they do not threaten people or property.

· Each lightning-caused fire is evaluated individually to determine the optimal response (suppression or fire use). When making decisions, fire managers consider the fire's proximity to private property, potential smoke impacts, firefighter safety, and other fire activity occurring in the area.

· With prescribed burning in the spring and fall and wildland fire use in the summer months, smoke impacts to airsheds will likely increase in the short-term. This is a delicate situation adjacent to areas not attaining EPA standards for criteria pollutants. Land management agencies should work with air quality regulators to minimize health impacts from smoke emissions. Conversely, air quality regulators should understand that increased use of fire will, over time, reduce overall wildland fire emissions and protect communities. Currently, emissions from wildfires being suppressed bring no regulatory workload or penalty to air quality districts, so that is their de facto preference over burning. Clean Air Act enforcement against other public agencies, like land managers, represent regulatory "low-hanging fruit." With no paid lobbyists to play the economic card, land managers get heavily regulated, as opposed to developers, farmers, and manufacturers. This is, despite the fact, that forest restoration is a growing segment of the public and private workforce.

· Wildland fire use is, by far, the most cost effective means of reducing wildland fuel loads, especially in rugged backcountry terrain, often costing a tenth or less than the cost to suppress the fire. Risks to firefighters are also dramatically reduced through wildland fire use. Constrained funds for hazardous fuel reduction should focus on the wildland urban interface, where homes are at risk. The environmental costs of road-building and other soil disturbance to commercially thin backcountry stands are disingenuous with regard to fire hazard risk reduction. It is a functional, healthy ecosystem that is at risk in our wildlands, not homes.

· Fire use and fire suppression are just two elements of a balanced fire management program. Managers also utilize prescribed fire, mechanical fuel reduction, research, monitoring, and education. Using these tools at the right times and in the right locations gives managers the flexibility to respond to and plan for many different situations. Ultimately, federal agencies need

to safely integrate wildland fire into our foothills and mountains to reduce future risks of devastating wildfires.

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