Fire Management Takes Commitment

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THIS paper is directed to two specific audiences; the managers who must approve and carry out fire management plans and secondly the scientists and staff who prepare the plans and who support the managers during operation of those management plans. In actual practice, both groups are an inseparable team; but for clarity, it is good to separate the two roles.

The manager who embarks on fire management must recognize that he is challenging tradition. He is advocating change. As a result, there will be many barriers to overcome, some predictable and some totally unexpected. By recording my experiences, perhaps others may be better prepared.

My major experience has been in reintroducing fire into wilderness ecosystems. I was fortunate to have a part in conceptualizing, organizing, studying, planning, and operation of the White Cap Fire Management Area in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness on the Bitterroot National Forest.

During the conceptual stage of the project, we had a chance to build the commitment that was later tested. The commitment must be based on concepts which the manager must be able to explain and defend. In our case, it was the concept that fire was not "bad" and thus to be suppressed, but rather that fire was a natural part of the ecosystem and should be allowed to the maximum degree possible. As the land

manager, I had to defend this concept several times. One was with my peer group—my fellow professional land managers. All land managers did not agree that fire should be reintroduced into the wilderness ecosystems. I found it necessary many times to explain, defend, and discuss the concepts that were involved. Not only did some of the managers disagree with the concept, but even more felt it wasn't worth the expense. With inflation and a high Federal budget, there are tremendous financial pressures. This may be the most significant obstacle to future fire management. Any manager wanting to do fire management must have the commitment to make the funds and man power available to do the planning and handle operations.

The concept of managing natural fire in wilderness ecosystems also had to be defended to the public. We found that if a good public involvement program was conducted, the public accepted the new approaches quite well. In order to be effective, though, everyone working on the project must seek out people who have objections and discuss the concepts and objectives of the program.

The greatest test of commitment occurs when the fire begins. We found that there were many counterpressures at that time. This was especially true in the fire suppression community. They sometimes see fire management as a threat, particularly in wilderness systems where fires are allowed to naturally start and burn free. It threatens the hard-won public image that fire is bad, which is the foundation of fire prevention efforts. It also threatens, in a subtle way, reputations of fire suppression teams when they are instructed to monitor and only partially suppress a fire. Past experiences tell them that their reputations are based on putting out fire rapidly and cheaply. Very often, as in our case, the fire comes in the height of a severe fire season when fire suppression resources are stretched thin. Under those conditions, suppression people do not want to risk a natural fire burning in the wilderness.

It has become increasingly evident that a land manager practicing fire management should permit only the highest quality work and decisions to enter into his management plan and operations. We have had recent examples of people managing natural fires without adequate planning, inventory, and prescriptions. The chance for failure

under these circumstances is exceedingly high, and every failure makes it more difficult to practice fire management.

A manager should be willing to commit his personal time to the program, otherwise it will not succeed. Fire management brings together all the elements of complex land management: public emotions, professional emotions, economics, environmental impacts, a high risk of heavy capital expenditure. All these things mean that the manager should be deeply involved in the decision making. He is the one who must balance the complexities and reach a meaningful decision. Considering the newness of the concepts, I believe it is a nondelegable responsibility.

For the scientist who is involved in the fire management study or operations plan, a special brand of commitment is needed. His barriers are different. He usually does not have the authority to make decisions and take action independently. He is a member of the team, with the line officer having the final responsibility. He must be willing to monitor the line officer's approaches, and if he is drifting away from some of the basics, sit down and discuss them. He must recognize that he is competing with many other programs for the manager's time and he must be willing to do good staff work for him. He also should be alert to invalid attacks and take immediate action to counter them with facts. He often is the most creditable member of the team during public discussion of the program.

The specialist should also be so committed to the involved concepts that he is willing to submerge his personal ego and desires and be a full member of the team, supporting the team in its total decisions and working within the team framework to make those changes that he desires. As an example, very often the specialist will want to move ahead faster and be more pure in the scientific application of the principles, but because of social, economic, or political reasons, it is necessary to go slower.

In closing and summary: Our experiences in the White Cap fire management program show that both the manager and scientist working in fire management must have an extremely strong commitment to the concept if they are to overcome the many barriers.