

Fire as a Force in Land Use Planning

JOHN R. McGUIRE
Chief
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

FIRE is not an independent force in Nature. When fire rages through the forest, it affects every aspect of the ecosystem—the soil, air, wildlife, trees, and all other plant life. Fire is one component of the total forest ecology, as you have reemphasized during the last two days.

Likewise, fire management cannot be separated from total forest management. It must always be considered in land use planning.

From our earliest history, fire was recognized as an enemy, and fire control measures grew out of catastrophe. An example that immediately comes to my mind is the Northeastern (Interstate Forest) Fire Protection Compact, which was created as a direct result of the disastrous Maine fires of 1947. In October of that year, seven major fires blackened 233,000 acres, destroyed more than 800 homes and killed 16 people. Even earlier, the great Peshtigo fire in the Green Bay area proved that this terrifying force of Nature must be controlled.

We've come a long way from these schools of catastrophe to our present fire management philosophy that fire is a sometime-enemy and a sometime-friend. Unfortunately, land use planning cannot boast such an evolutionary history—for it is just now at the stage through which fire management was feeling its way perhaps three decades ago.

While fire forced us to make decisions and formulate policies, we disregarded the catastrophes that arose from lack of land use planning. Maybe this was because the results of poor land use did not seem as visible or as dramatic as the specter of a raging fire. But, we are now realizing that lack of land use planning can be far more devastating than any forest fire. Many forests that were swept by flames in the 1930s and earlier are today growing vigorous stands of trees. Yet the acres ruined by lack of land use planning in the '30s may not grow trees again for decades.

We can no longer wait until catastrophe forces us to change. Our forest resources are too limited and too necessary to our national well-being. We must now anticipate change, and plan for change—whether it is change in demands on our forest resources, change in environmental factors, or change in our attitudes toward fire. This is the key concept behind land use planning.

In the early days, everyone accepted, and even welcomed, fire control. But even now land use planning is far from being universally accepted. The sanctity of private property has its roots deep in our history, and landowners are understandably suspicious of any attempts to direct the use of their land, whether by the Federal government, States, or local governments. Likewise, many States fear that Federal land use planning efforts will erode the rights traditionally granted to the States.

Yet we must accept the reality that we have to embrace land use planning on all lands—private land and State-owned land, as well as Federal property. When fire surges over the land, it doesn't distinguish between public and private land, or between Federal and State ownerships. Fire, like air, water, and other environmental components, transcends property lines. When we are planning the use of such a fragile thing as the land, our plans must also transcend property lines—if they are to be truly effective and draw the greatest benefit from the resource without destroying that resource. What happens on one piece of land affects land across boundary lines, maybe even miles away.

But neither the Forest Service nor any other Federal agency can draw up land use plans for the entire country. Nor would we want to,

even if we had the authority. So, the Forest Service works with owners, local governments, the States, and the general public to build national land-use process from the bottom up. We have no intention of imposing land use planning from the top of the governmental pyramid down.

I can remember a time when we never even dreamed that we would reach a point when there would no longer be enough public land to satisfy nearly everyone's needs. But, today, conflicts are arising even over the use of areas adjoining public lands. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the current controversy over inholdings within the National Forests. When these private lands are intertwined with public lands, problems often arise, since actions on one piece of land either damage or improve the other property. A prime example is Massanutten Mountain in Virginia. Located in the scenic Shenandoah Valley, the area is a prime vacationland for city dwellers from nearby Richmond, Washington, and Baltimore. Forty-two percent of the mountain is privately-owned. Land developers have realized the recreational value of the area—at latest count, 72 vacation subdivisions are moving up the Massanutten slopes. Not only has this influx hurt the environment in many instances, it has also driven up land values, making it almost impossible for the Forest Service to ever buy these inholdings. Ironically, the proximity to National Forest land is what often drives the price of inholdings to prohibitive levels.

Very recently we saw how inholdings can complicate even our fire control efforts. In late August, the so-called Soboba fire raged over the San Bernadino National Forest and adjacent lands. At one time during the five-day blaze, 134 ground tankers from county, State, and Federal agencies were battling the flames. We would not have needed nearly this much fire-fighting equipment if it hadn't been for private holdings on or near the San Bernadino, including a Girl Scout camp, a YMCA camp, a youth detention center and numerous resort homes.

This proved, I think, that fire management must be included in our land use plans. I view fire as an equal environmental component—along with soil, air, water, land, and life forms. In any planning, we must consider all values and possible uses of a site: water, recrea-

tion, timber, range, wildlife, wilderness, historical values, and esthetics. To plan long-term management of the land, we must insure that we do not proceed haphazardly. Each program, whether it be fire management or protection of natural beauty, must be ecologically sound and must support the objectives of a rational land management plan.

The important question that always confronts us is what, among many alternatives, we will do with our land. But there is another important question: Who will decide what we will do with our land? The answer is very complex. As foresters and fire managers, we have a part in this decision, but only a part. Even on Federal lands, there are many other decisionmakers—not only the managers, but also the American people, the Congress, and even the Courts.

We are now in what must be called the age of the environment, and the public is becoming more and more interested in land use planning—and, I believe, more knowledgeable about our natural resources and about land management principles. I notice this in the responses to our environmental impact statements and in the public involvement programs that we often initiate, even when an environmental statement is not technically needed. During our Roadless Area Review and Evaluation to establish a plan of study to select new Wilderness areas, we held more than 300 meetings, which attracted more than 25,000 people and stimulated more than 50,000 comments.

We hope to experience a similar response to the Environmental Program for the Future, which we released on August 13 for public review. This draft long-term forestry document sets out three alternative levels of management for six different resource systems. These are: land and water; timber; recreation; range; wildlife and fish habitat; and human and community development. The document is now being reviewed by the public—with a December 15 deadline for all comments. But, whatever the responses; we must not forget to weigh carefully the cost against the benefits of various decisions, and to consider carefully the trade-offs involved.

Our legislators have not unanimously agreed on what role Congress should play in land use planning, as was demonstrated in the debates that ensued when land use planning bills were introduced

this session in both the Senate and the House. As you know, in the end, no bill was passed.

I'd like to point out, however, that Congress did pass landmark legislation in the form of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act, which we've been calling the Humphrey-Rarick Bill. The Act, first, calls for long-term forestry assessments for the next five decades. An assessment of America's renewable resources is to be made every 10 years. But, to enable us to get the machinery in motion, the first assessment will be due December 31, 1975. This will be updated in 1979, and subsequent assessments will be submitted every 10 years.

In addition to the assessments, the Forest Service must submit a long-range program for the National Forest System, our cooperative programs and our research programs. The programs must cover at least four decades and must be updated every five years. The first such program is due December 31, 1975.

Obviously, the Environmental Program for the Future, in its finalized form, should serve as a basis for the programs required by the Humphrey-Rarick legislation. In fact, we hope that the Environmental Program for the Future will actually serve as the long range program, although it is too early to tell whether or not this will be feasible.

As you probably know, we have a backlog of National Forest land that needs reforestation and some rangeland that needs improvements. In the past, a tight Federal budget has not allowed us to make much headway on this backlog. One very important section of the Humphrey-Rarick Bill sets the year 2000 as the target for clearing up these backlogs.

The type of long-range planning set up by the Humphrey-Rarick Bill and the Environmental Program for the Future should complement and aid our national land use planning efforts.

While Congress has been playing a vital role in the future of our land, the courts have also become increasingly involved in resource issues.

Ever since the National Environmental Policy Act was passed in 1969, various environmental groups have sought the power of the courts in making the ultimate land-use planning decisions. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area is a prime example. In a sense, Congress set

land use planning machinery in motion when it designated the area as Wilderness. The Forest Service practiced land use planning as the Federal agency responsible for preserving and protecting the area. Then, a private individual sought to plan the use of part of this land when he tried to exercise mineral rights which he owned in the area. Next, an environmental group sought to influence the land use planning of the BWCA when it filed a lawsuit to ban mining activity. The courts made the latest land use planning decision when a U.S. District Court judge ruled against any mining activity in the area. And, it will apparently be the highest court in the land which makes the ultimate land use planning decision on mining in the BWCA, since the government has appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

This is where we are in our land use planning efforts. But where are we going, and how can fire managers and researchers help the progress of land use planning?

We've already seen a great deal of progress in fire management. As you know, this year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Clarke-McNary Act which initiated our cooperative fire control efforts. Now we must tie our progress in fire management and other areas into a whole fabric, and start making greater progress toward both long-range forestry management and land use planning. Fire managers must constantly insure that fire is considered an equal component in forest ecology — along with soil, air, water, land and life forms. Much of the progress that you've made in fire management will be cancelled out if fire is allowed to become an ecological island separated from the broad body of land use planning.