

Fire Management Section

INTRODUCTION

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IT'S a pleasure to have this opportunity to serve as Chairman of the Fire Management Section. And it's particularly encouraging to me, as I attend this conference, to reflect on the changes that have taken place in the 4 years since my last Missoula fire conference.

There was considerable feeling at that time that *only* certain wild-eyed ecologists felt that fire had an important role in our wildland management programs. There were indications that air pollution problems caused by smoke from prescribed and natural fires would be unacceptable to EPA standards. And there was a belief that the public wouldn't understand our use of fire after years of indoctrination by Smokey Bear.

Yet today, 4 years later, we lead off our first day's program by discussing currently active programs of fire management in the national forests and the national parks, followed by panel discussions of fire management and wilderness values and possible modifications of suppression outside of wilderness. This is a most encouraging development which has presumably been based on such forms of progress as the following:

- (1) Additional research on the role of fire has been carried out in the laboratory and the field and information on this has been widely disseminated—including the results both beneficial and adverse to man's economic interests.
- (2) There has been additional discussion about the relationship between fire management and air pollution, so that while there is much yet to be learned, perhaps this no longer seems the major stumbling block it once appeared to be. We must monitor air quality, but we do not need to stop all burning while we do so.
- (3) There have been additional opportunities for managers and researchers to observe the results of both benign fire and wild-fire in the field.
- (4) There has been additional evidence that the public is not unalterably opposed to new ideas about fire or any other subject.
- (5) And because of these new facts, discussions, and opportunities, there is more enthusiasm on the part of managers to try prescribed burning and allowing natural fires to burn in programs integrated with traditional suppression policies.

The fact that there are indications of such changes is encouraging to me—because 4 years ago, there was a philosophy expressed that, “we can't gamble with as potent a force as fire—either we must have it under full control at all times or we shouldn't use it at all.” Such black and white rules will not suffice for the Forest Service or Park Service manager or the State agency official as he faces important decisions in the next few years on how he will manage fire in his wildlands.

If I were to try to summarize what's needed for a successful fire management program, I think I'd emphasize these three requirements.

FIRST, we need facts and understanding about fire, fuel, terrain, and climate. (The Forest Service is leading the way in this through their White Cap Fire Management Plan.)

SECOND, we need enthusiasm, commitment, and guts, meaning:

- (a) a willingness to prescribe burn or to let natural fires burn without absolute assurance you will not get in trouble;
- (b) meaning a willingness to make tough decisions with the best information at hand—

- (1) in certain cases deciding to suppress the fire because of when the conditions are not right;
- (2) in other cases, deciding to burn or let it burn based on sound evaluation of the prescription and weather;
- (3) and in other situations, to go in after an initial decision to let it burn and decide to contain the fire on one perimeter, even though there could be possible criticism that “if you put it out initially, it would have only cost a few hundred dollars, now it cost thousands.”

For however much we can learn about the role of fire in a particular forest type under a given set of fuel, weather, and topographic parameters, there will always be *some* risk in a decision to prescribe burn or to let a fire burn. The decision to suppress, of course, appears to have the lesser risk over the short span of time. It's the safe, traditional, status quo decision and theoretically gets no one in trouble. But in the long run, fuel accumulates and another manager at a later time faces an even tougher decision.

As the third and final point, I feel we should not fall into the trap of believing that “the public won't understand a new direction in fire management.”

Based partly on my experience at Sequoia and Kings Canyon, I believe the public will accept a reasonable program presented to it effectively by the Forest Service, the Park Service, or whatever Federal or State land management agency is involved. I do not mean they will do so blindly. I mean that if we are willing to go to the public and explain our programs openly and fully and to answer reasonable questions put to us, we demonstrate both professional ability to manage wildlands and also professional ability in interpreting the reasons behind our programs. With such an approach, we will gain public acceptance of a new, exciting, and ecologically viable management of wildlands.