



## **“America’s Forest Management Crisis - A National Catastrophe”**

### **Position Paper**

#### **The current situation**

As we examine the impacts and effects of recent catastrophic wildfires, our nation faces a crisis of epic proportions. There are cries from across the political spectrum to change the current reality. There have been papers, books, initiatives, forums, studies, articles, petitions, and Congressional concerns both at the state and national level. There is increasing interest by successive Administrations to “do something”.

Unlike the intense polarized debate of most nationally prominent issues, the impacts of catastrophic wildfire, and the path forward is at least somewhat understood across most of the nation. We can no longer simply invest in small scale fuel treatments and make small incremental increases in funding on treatments while continuing to spend billions of dollars to fight these uncharacteristically destructive wildfires. The National Association of Forest Service Retirees (NAFSR) strongly believes now is the time to “do something”.

It is difficult to adequately understand the current level of death and destruction, especially in Western communities. Irreplaceable natural resources have been lost, vital soil has washed away, and untold floods have occurred—damaging community water systems. Other resources impacted include fish habitat, water quantity, water quality, and the timing of release from an ever-dwindling snowpack. Smoke has impacted the health of people near and far from wildfires. It is hard to imagine the emotional and psychological trauma on our firefighters and citizens from the loss of loved ones, homes, and communities.

The enormous effects from the warming climate, combined with landscapes out of balance, have created a deepening environmental, social and health crisis within our nation. By

September 2020, California wildland fires had already generated more than 91 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, which is about 25% more than the state's annual emissions from fossil fuels. Researchers project that by 2050 many of our beloved dry forest habitat types are at risk of disappearing.

Critically needed reforestation is simply not happening, and conversion to brush is occurring at a rapid rate. Impacts and warnings have been eloquently described in many professionally written papers, articles, and books in recent years. Despite all the concerns and outcries, the situation worsens each year. Not very much is getting done.

### **What should we do?**

We strongly believe that the general population of our country understands that there is a path forward to address this crisis, and many of our citizens across the political spectrum understand key components of that path. What is lacking is focused leadership and advocacy from top government officials including the President, Governors, and other key leaders.

Along with that advocacy comes the critical need to make the nation's budgetary and legislative process work towards resolution. We should have changed course many years ago. Even those who do not live in the most affected states see a need for action. How do we take a step back and try to better examine how to move forward?

### **NAFSR recommends the following actions -**

1. **Landscape Treatments.** The current situation stems from overly dense forests with massive amounts of accumulated biomass, extensive development in the wildland urban interface (WUI), and climate change. Continuing to emphasize fire suppression efforts without front end investment in treatments of large landscapes has brought us here, and more of the same will not solve the problem. It will take a paradigm shift to make a difference. Actions must take place on all three fronts.
2. **Landscape Investments.** The Administration must step forward to fully support and Congress must act to provide the funding for the Forest Service to prepare and implement a 10-year plan to significantly reduce wildfire risk. The science, data, and capability exist to do that now. A science-based approach to treatment of large landscapes is needed and management actions must be done at the right place, at the right time, and for the right reasons.

To return low intensity fires to key landscapes will cost several billion dollars over multiple years and will require the use of a wide variety of management tools ranging from prescribed fire to a variety of mechanical treatments including mastication, mulching, thinning, and commercial harvest. The budgetary commitment amounts to increases using the word "billion" not "million." However, compare the cost to the estimated economic damage of \$150 billion dollars caused by wildfires in 2020 as

opposed to the \$3-5 billion dollars per year to treat these lands. These plans and treatments must also include acres on other federal, state, tribal, and private lands and be prepared and implemented in a coordinated manner.

3. **Massive Development in the Wildland Urban Interface.** Since 2000, suburban development has encroached on wildland forests. Not only has this heightened the risks of loss for new residents and businesses, but it has also altered wildlife habitats, impacted soils and groundwater through extensive use of individual water wells and septic systems.

Further, it has driven up the costs of protecting these newly developed areas from wildfires and suppressing wildfires that occur. While local governments are responsible for land use regulations regarding new developments, the recent scale of development warrants a broader, more intensive communications strategy that highlights the tradeoffs between the gains from increased development and the risks and costs of further WUI development. Collaboration with the home insurance industry in a messaging campaign is an option NAFSR believes has potential.

4. **Climate Change.** NAFSR supports healthy and productive forests as a counterbalance to the forces that cause climate change. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen into the atmosphere and in the process store carbon for the long term as wood. These gigantic wildfires are releasing destructive amounts of stored carbon back into the atmosphere. In addition to reducing wildfire size and risk, planting trees is another essential action to reduce climate change. NAFSR recommends increasing the size of the reforestation trust fund and supporting efforts to increase reforestation capability.
5. **Capacity.** NAFSR is convinced that the Forest Service does not currently have the capacity to do the job it is required to perform. There are two dimensions to the lack of capacity. First, the agency does not have the necessary mix of skills in its current workforce. Second, there are too few people to implement the actions needed.

These same points apply to many of its federal, state, and tribal partners. NAFSR completed a recent study and published a report that confirms a dramatic loss of capacity over time which is available on our website [www.nafsr.org](http://www.nafsr.org). The loss of capacity is directly related to the shift of employees to fire suppression and away from its basic land management function. We recommend the Forest Service prepare a staffing plan to complement the wildland fire plan.

6. **Significant Changes.** It will require a large, highly organized effort and multi-jurisdictional coalitions to support the massive work to be done at such a large scale. Not only will budgetary increases be required, but also significant policy changes, such as considerations of alternative funding sources. For example, authority should be sought to sell carbon credits for reforestation projects to the private sector.

It will require improved ways to use biomass to reduce costs, such as building more biomass electricity generating plants. The USDA woody biomass grants program has been successful and should be expanded.

Finally, regulatory constraints on implementing projects should be loosened to enable faster approval and implementation of essential fuels treatment and management activities that improve the health and resiliency of the nation's forests.

## **Conclusion**

This crisis is truly an emergency. NAFSR believes that now is the time to initiate action. There are no quick, easy solutions. We need leadership and vision to approach the many facets of the problem in the most effective way. This issue is so large and so important that we believe it calls for more than several efforts or fixes. It calls for the forestry community to commit to doing something, not just in the short term to begin changing the trajectory, but to accelerate a broader approach for the long term to ensure that progress is ongoing well into the decades ahead.

This is not just a public land issue. It is an issue that faces all forested lands in America. There needs to be a concerted effort to put our focus on working together across ownerships, states, tribes, watersheds, landscapes, competing special interests, and political divides. This effort must recognize that far more financial resources are needed than are presently available. These additional financial resources will be far less than the massive wildfire costs we are currently paying each year.

To effectively change the reality that we face, it is going to take much more focused efforts to address this issue together by setting priorities, committing to increase the capacity to change forest conditions, and to sticking with a vision to change the situation at the tribal, state and federal levels. We absolutely must work together across boundaries and ideologies to make a difference. It will take a campaign that does not waiver in the face of the change to the next administration or the next crisis to confront the agency. It will require reliable off-budget funds for the Forest Service, DOI agencies, tribes, and states.

Without this action, we will continue to lose our forests, communities, and the lives of many people. This is a massive crisis that must be addressed before it is too late.

March 31, 2021