

Wildfire – Is There a Solution?

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The specter of increasing mega-wildfires that wreak havoc with human life, human habitation, local economies and valuable natural resources is both realistic and unsettling. Since record keeping began in the 1960's, 8 of the 10 worst fire seasons have occurred since 2000 reaching a record level in 2015 of 10.1 million total acres burned. The increased occurrence of these high intensity wildfires has not only devastated communities and landscapes but has also resulted in the soaring cost of firefighting. As one example, in 2015 one of every two dollars allocated to the U.S. Forest Service was used to control wildfire. This has not only siphoned off critically needed funds to support other resource management needs, but has resulted in a fundamental shift in professional staffing with nearly 50% of U.S. Forest Service employees now connected to fire. Is there anything we can do to change Nevada's future that seems filled with the prospect of undesirable consequences resulting from the increasing occurrence of mega-fires?

One important solution is implementation of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. Adopted in 2009, the strategy has three major areas of focus: restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes, promoting the development of Fire Adapted Communities, and implementing a safe, effective, rapid response to the ignition of wildfires. The table that follows highlights some specific actions that can be taken under each of the strategy's major areas of emphasis. The effectiveness of this three-part strategy can only be realized through the true collaboration of all affected parties including local, state, and federal partners as well as citizens living in high fire threat locations. In Nevada, there is also an important role to be played by an independent, non-governmental organization that can broker partnership agreements and provide the assistance necessary for communities to prepare for the occurrence of fire. Plans are currently being developed by Nevada's fire officials and cooperators to fully implement this cohesive strategy across the State. Success of the strategy will rest on the willingness of people in positions of responsibility at all levels to form collaborative partnerships, integrate both indigenous knowledge and the "best science" into prescriptive treatments, and utilize the information and education made available by the Living With Fire Program (www.livingwithfire.info).

Wildfire is not just another natural disaster and should not be treated as such. Applying the Cohesive Strategy to: 1) adequately prepare people and the place they call home for the occurrence of fire, 2) actively manage land and vegetation to reduce the threat posed by hazardous fuels, and 3) control fires while they are small, collectively holds promise to reverse the trends now seen as so ominous. Establishing a formal process that captures the synergism inherent to true collaboration will ensure that the promise becomes reality.

Restore and Maintain Resilient Landscapes	Promote the Wide Scale Development of Fire Adapted Communities	Implement a Safe, Effective, Efficient, Risk-Based Response to Wildfire Ignition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce hazardous fuels on a landscape scale using all available management tools including mechanical treatment, grazing, and prescribed or managed fire. • Implement effective post-fire rehabilitation selecting sites and using practices that increase the probability of success. • Support collaborative partnerships across all ownerships including the use of stewardship contracts and all other available authorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update Community Wildfire Protection plans and assess risk at the parcel level. • Continuously expose residents in fire prone locations to messages of vulnerability and applicable mitigation measures. • Support an effective NGO to help communities prepare for fire, increase self-reliance and create working community/fire service partnerships. • Utilize the severity of the wildfire threat to preemptively address residential development requirements and building codes. • Promote the development of commercial uses for biomass. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop rapid, safe, aggressive initial attack capability utilizing local resources where that opportunity exists. • Integrate private sector capabilities into all phases of wildfire management and initial attack capability. • Reintroduce fire as a management tool to reduce hazardous fuels and create fire resilient landscapes. • Integrate fire prevention and education programs across jurisdictions to prepare communities for wildfire including evacuation training. • Integrate local resources into regional and national efforts in the areas of training, qualifications, mobilization, and the sharing of resources.