

Utah Catastrophic Wildfire Plan

Smoke Management Barriers to moving forward

Background: Fire is a natural disturbance that is critical in maintaining ecosystem health and creating healthy resilient watersheds in Southern Utah. These ecosystems are fire dependent because they have evolved with fire over time and they require fire to maintain and sustain them. Fire and other management activities are used to remove aged and dead timber, grass, forb and brush species, in an attempt to replicate natural disturbances in maintaining natural succession or restore health to forested and non-forested environments. These healthy ecosystems provide beneficial functions to humans and wildlife alike. Wildlife and other ungulates benefit from improved habitat and diverse forage. Human benefit from clean drinking water, clean air, stable slopes, safe communities, along with numerous economic benefits, recreational opportunities, sustainable resources, as well as a sense of place and ownership.

Human intervention in the suppression of wildfires (i.e. fire exclusion), coupled with development in the wildland urban interface, invasive species, lack of mechanical treatment on the landscape, timber harvest, grazing, etc. has altered these landscapes. These landscapes are no longer properly functioning and are now at greater risk of catastrophic fire. Private land owners and Land Management agencies need to drastically increase the number of acres being treated and maintained annually.

Currently much of the local population doesn't recognize the dire need for the treatment of both public and private lands regardless of proposed treatment types. These ecosystems require fire in addition to other types of disturbance to become and remain healthy. Fire happens to be a tool used regularly as it is a very economical tool and it is the key disturbance mechanism in these fire-dependent ecosystems.

In many locations such as the Southern and Eastern states, fire is used as a tool at a much larger scale as compared to Southern Utah. In Texas alone land management agencies annually burn approximately 200,000 acres a year. In these states the public recognizes that ecosystems are fire dependent, and the value and benefit fire plays in both ecosystem management and public safety.

Currently local land managers spend approximately seventy percent of their annual fuels budgets implementing treatments in the wildland urban interface, in many cases these communities do not recognize the benefits of these treatments in helping to reduce the risk of a high intensity wildfire impacting them.

Problem Statement: Public perception of the role and benefits of fire and the tolerance for resulting smoke impacts is lacking. This often results in vocal group(s) of the public voicing their dislike to elected officials, who then carry these concerns to the various land management agencies, higher ranking elected officials and regulatory agencies seeking to have greater constraints placed on activities that produce smoke. These additional constraints are more stringent than those in place from the Utah Department of Air Quality. State and federal agencies have for years shared with the public the benefits and critical needs of the treatments. In some cases the public has stated that they are tired of being educated.

Federal and State entities are required to develop detailed burn plans, which carefully define specific fuels and weather parameters, desired fire behavior and fire effects. In addition agencies comply with the Utah Smoke Management Plan (SMP), which states "The purpose of the Utah SMP is to identify the

responsibilities of the Utah Division of Air Quality and Federal and State land managers to coordinate procedures that mitigate the impacts of prescribed fire and the use of naturally occurring fire to meet Land and Resource management objectives on public health, visibility and public safety in terms of smoke or visibility impacts” (SMP, 2006). “This plan is designated to meet the requirements of Title R307, state administrative rule for air quality; Regional Haze Rule, 40 CFR 51.309(d)(6); and the policies of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Interim Air Quality Policy on Wildland and Prescribed Fire (Interim Policy) (SMP, 2006). “R307-204 establishes by rule the procedures that land managers are required to follow to mitigate the impact of smoke on public health and visibility in the State” (SMP, 2006).

Federal and State entities must comply with the Utah SMP requirements. They are also responsive in the timing and amount of smoke being emitted into our local airshed’s during periods of concern to the public and elected officials.

Land managers are currently constrained by burn plan requirements, environmental conditions, Utah SMP, land management plans, and the logical avoidance periods such as holidays. These constraints limit when fire can be utilized as a tool, reducing the already limited opportunities when conditions are favorable which in turn limits the amount of restoration our ecosystems receive. Land Managers need fewer implied constraints from elected officials and greater support in the form of recognition of the benefits in increasing their ability to burn, or allowing naturally ignited fires to meet resource objectives throughout the year.

Recommendation: Cooperation from elected officials in support of land management agencies in fire management activities (prescribed and resource management) working to inform, educate and alter the public perception of fire.

All Elected officials and stakeholders need to become aware of the risks associated with the use of fire, the risk of not using fire and take ownership in decisions that affect their interests.

Through close coordination and cooperation all impacted entities work on identifying logical periods and/or events where agencies should avoid putting smoke into local communities. Create one location/entity that land managers can contact to see if communities have events planned where a smoke free environment is desirable. Involve key individuals during key fire management decisions. Elected officials meet with land management agencies to define areas where naturally occurring fire should not be allowed to burn and define the avoidance concern and also define those areas where naturally occurring fire may be allowed to meet resource objective.

All stakeholders should work on the development of biomass markets and biomass companies. A reliable biomass source must be made available to these companies. Currently there is a lack of infrastructure for forest products in our area and a local workforce to perform the work which needs to be developed.

All stakeholders should work together with a common voice sharing the same message in changing the public perception of fire management activities. “Much of the general public has a negative perception of fire management activities, making it difficult for land managers to use fire as tool in restoring landscape health. Education will be a critical tool in allowing land managers to conduct vital treatments at an appropriate scale. It is increasingly important for the public to understand and accept the choice

they face. We must either be willing to change perceptions and behaviors, or else be willing to live with the consequences” (Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy document).

References

Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy, author unknown and date unknown

Utah Smoke Management Plan, 1999 revised 1/16/2006