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THE HIGH-INTENSITY AND LARGE-FIRE ISSUE IN WILDERNESS

Group D. Discussion Report
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The large, active group that discussed the issue of high-intensity and large fires in wilderness agreed that such fires will occur in the future, whether they are wildfires or prescription fires. They agreed further that, in some areas at least, such fires are appropriate because they are important natural events that have been instrumental in the dynamic processes shaping many wilderness ecosystems. Although some high-intensity and large fires are ecologically appropriate, they are nevertheless unacceptable because of their excessive costs and risks.

The major limiting factors that make some of these fires unacceptable can be usefully considered in terms of the decision space pentagon presented earlier at this symposium by Orville Daniels. The five limiting factors in this concept are social, political, economic, physical and biological. All five must be considered in dealing with the high-intensity and large-fire issue because there are specific, critical problems under each heading, any of which can be the limiting factor in a particular situation. In general, however, the group felt that social, political, and economic factors usually dominate, and the larger or more intense the fire, the more dominant these factors become.

The specific problems identified as most likely to be critical constraints were smoke, spread of fire outside the wilderness, and downstream effects (in essence, another form of spread outside the wilderness to areas with different objectives and values). Although safety was mentioned only briefly as an issue in the group discussions, we would add it to the list.

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Numerous concerns were raised. Some of these concerns were:

1. Could high-intensity and large fires endanger the present wilderness fire management program by exceeding the tolerance level of key publics?

2. Could high-intensity, large prescription fires, at least in National Forest wilderness, exceed budgets in the benefiting functions (such as the wildlife and recreation functions), and thus preclude further prescribed wilderness fires? (Dollars are limiting.)

3. Should wilderness fire management plans extend beyond wilderness boundaries if high-intensity, large wilderness fires are to be dealt with adequately? Fuel reduction buffers, preferably outside the wilderness boundary, were suggested. Land management planning might be a useful vehicle for dealing with the possibility of the spread of fire outside wilderness boundaries.

4. Is there an increased risk of invasion of exotic plants, some of which have light, widely dispersed seeds, in areas burned by large, high-intensity fires that may severely reduce local seed sources and vegetative reproductive organisms?

5. It is important to adhere to approved wilderness fire plans. Managers must have the commitment to follow the plan and not be tempted to improvise or second-guess.

6. The public will be less tolerant of smoke and other adverse effects of a fire burning under prescription, especially a large, high-intensity fire, than of a wildfire that managers are attempting to suppress. The wildfire is considered an "act of God," in a sense, whereas the prescription fire is the manager's responsibility.

7. Social acceptability of high-intensity, large fires will depend critically on a high level of technical competency by managers, and the least competent manager may determine the credibility of the program.

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8. Management policies for high-intensity, large fires should be tailored to fit varying local conditions, not applied inflexibly over widespread wilderness systems.

Several recommendations came out of the group discussions:

1. Concentrate on building understanding of wilderness fire with affected publics. The group felt this was the top priority, and the better it was done, the less problem there would be later with political and economic factors. It was felt that education/involvement efforts need to be targeted at specific publics. (Someone said, "We need to know who the players are, and the level of understanding and tolerance for wilderness fire of each player.") For example, it was suggested that local residents require one education/involvement approach, whereas nonlocal visitors require a different approach.

2. Increase research directed at improving long-term predictability of behavior of long-burning fires. This need was labeled "seasonal severity index" and related to the difficulty of predicting what an early season fire may do a month or two later, depending on the type of fire season that develops.

3. Establish a clearinghouse or procedure for the exchange of wilderness fire management plans and supporting information. It was pointed out that Bill Fischer of the Northern Forest Fire Laboratory has been performing much of this function effectively.

4. Build more within-agency understanding and support for wilderness fire management by encouraging persons not normally involved to have direct, hands-on experience with wilderness fires, perhaps for 3 to 5 days. The resulting improved employee understanding could strengthen public education and help build support.

5. Continue to strive for common terminology for wilderness fire management.