Western Governors’ Association  
Policy Resolution 2016-06  

Wildland Fire Management and Resilient Landscapes

A. **BACKGROUND**

1. The health of the nation’s federal forests and rangelands has deteriorated due to a reduction in active management, past federal fire suppression policies and other management activities, and changing climate conditions. Overgrowth and crowding in forests has allowed damaging insects and diseases to flourish. Many of our rangelands are infested with cheatgrass or other undesirable invasive species. The result has been a significant increase in the average acreage burned, higher fire severity and suppression costs, increased impacts on public health, damage to the environment and more communities threatened and impacted by wildfires every year.

2. Active management, such as rangeland habitat restoration projects, improved livestock grazing practices and targeted grazing, thinning, timber harvest, prescribed fire, and road maintenance, has been used successfully to improve the health of forest and rangeland ecosystems. This type of active management can provide significant benefits to ecosystem function, while protecting and promoting development of healthy, resilient landscapes. However, complex analysis processes, inadequate funding, and legal challenges on federal lands have hampered efforts to increase the pace and scale of active forest and rangeland management sufficient to make a measurable difference on a landscape scale.

3. State aviation resources (both fixed and rotary-wing and also resources contracted for by states) are an integral part of wildfire suppression programs nationwide. Large fixed-wing air tankers play an important role in firefighting, as well. While the availability of federal aircraft has significantly improved in recent years, inaction on approving and funding a national wildfire aviation strategy is still an overarching problem. This strategy developed by federal and state wildfire management agencies identifies nationally-shared aerial resource needs. It is overdue to be updated and implemented.

4. In severe wildfire seasons, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has “borrowed” from other program areas, such as community assistance and hazardous fuels reduction, to pay the costs of wildland fire suppression. Due to the costs of fighting increasingly devastating wildfires, USFS wildfire suppression needs have risen from 13 percent of the agency’s
total annual budget, in federal fiscal year 1991 (FY1991), to over 40 percent in most recent years. This “borrowing” from other accounts has in turn required the USFS to scale back investments in important activities that can help prevent major fires. In a meeting in Washington, D.C. in February 2016, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack reported to Western Governors that wildfire suppression costs ate up 60 percent of the USFS budget in FY2015. Many western state climatologists anticipate significant increases in annual acres burned by wildfires in their states, in the coming years and decades. Combatting these fires and protecting Western communities will require greater federal investment.

5. In 2009, Congress passed the Federal Land Assistance and Management Enhancement Act (the FLAME Act) which established a split fund to cover USFS and U.S. Department of the Interior wildland fire suppression costs. Since that time, however, wildfire suppression needs have continued to require the USFS to utilize “fire borrowing.”

6. The FLAME Act also directed the Secretary of the Interior and the Secretary of Agriculture, acting jointly, to develop a new National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy (CS). Phase I of the CS established three goals: creating resilient landscapes, fire adapted communities, and more effective response to wildfire. Phase II of the Strategy was the creation of regional science-based risk analysis reports and regional action plans. Phase III was the completion of the National Strategy Report, and the National Science Teams Report. These documents will inform the implementation of the CS across boundaries to meet the three main goals.

7. When developing the CS, policy barriers and process complexities were identified which affect the ability to effectively and efficiently share resources, not only for wildfire, but for work on hazardous fuels and prescribed fire activities. The USFS role in state-state billing procedures is one of these complex processes and the federal authority to continue to perform this role is unclear. The USFS provides initial payment for state resources responding to another state’s wildfire incident and provides assistance for out-of-state resource mobilization tracking. By initially compensating states for mobilized resources and seeking subsequent reimbursement from states receiving outside assistance, the USFS plays an essential role in facilitating rapid and efficient response to wildland fires.

8. The use of Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) was initially approved by Congress in 2009 for projects in Colorado and Utah. The Authority enables state agencies to act as an agent for the federal agency to complete similar or complementary forest and land management activities across state, federal and private landowner boundaries. The 2014 Farm Bill passed by Congress authorized and expanded GNA to all states with National Forest System lands within their borders. Several states are using or exploring the
potential implementation of this Authority to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on federal forests.

9. The use of Stewardship Contracting Authority (SCA) was initially approved by Congress in 2003 and permanently reauthorized in the 2014 Farm Bill to allow forest products to be exchanged for services rendered to restore forest function and health, improve wildlife habitat, or make improvements to recreational or other federal facilities. Where it has been used, SCA has been a valuable tool to restore forest health and wildlife habitat across the West.

10. Wildfires can have significant adverse impacts on local communities and economies, in the immediate and long-term aftermath of fire. The economic impacts of a major wildfire disaster can often be felt nationally, including interruptions of transportation and the import and export of commodities. In numerous cases in recent years, Western Governors’ requests for federal disaster recovery assistance for their communities have been denied by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In December 2014, Western Governors called on federal agencies to “reexamine the standards used for provision of Individual Assistance to better provide homeowners and renters the aid they need to recover from wildfires and the other types of major disasters that are increasingly affecting Western states.”

11. The 2014 Farm Bill introduced significant expansions of federal authority and powerful new tools to improve forest resilience, promote collaboration especially between states and federal agencies, and address concerns related to administrative objections and litigation.

B. GOVERNORS’ POLICY STATEMENT

1. Western Governors call on Congress and the Administration to finally put an end to “fire borrowing,” by enacting legislation to allow federal agencies to treat wildfires similar to other disasters, in which federal agencies can access an emergency account to pay for disaster response activities once they extend beyond an average annual limit.

2. Western Governors call on Congress and the Administration to fully implement the FLAME Act, to accomplish the goals of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, and to implement the regional action plans, accepted by the Wildland Fire Executive Council, for each of the Cohesive Strategy regions.

3. Western Governors call on Congress to authorize active management and forest and rangeland health improvement on federally managed lands, especially those nominated by the state governors and approved by the Secretary of Agriculture as priority
Western Governors call on Congress to enact legislation designed to reinforce the role and effectiveness of collaboration in implementing projects on federally managed lands, and to reduce administrative and preparation processes, costs, and legal challenges to science-based collaborative projects.

4. Western Governors support increased capacity and coordination of state, federal and private aerial resources to respond to wildland fire. The Governors support an immediate revision and implementation of the National Interagency Aviation Management Strategy. Federal policy should not unreasonably restrict the mobilization and use of state and national guard firefighting aircraft on federal wildfires.

5. Western Governors encourage expedited and coordinated consultation of requirements by federal and state agencies to address Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and other environmental laws to ensure timely review and approval of needed forest and rangeland restoration and active management on affected landscapes.

6. Western Governors support identification and correction of policy barriers that prevent the effective sharing of resources for wildland fire and land management activities.

7. Western Governors encourage federal agencies to fully implement, and for Congress to fully fund, the tools provided in the 2014 Farm Bill, to expedite forest and watershed restoration projects that improve the resiliency of federal forest lands.

8. Western Governors support the use of Good Neighbor Authority, as authorized in the 2014 Farm Bill, to increase the pace and scale of restoration on federal lands where local interest and support exists.

9. Western Governors support the use of Stewardship Contracting as permanently reauthorized in the 2014 Farm Bill to enable federal agencies to more effectively implement forest health improvement projects on a landscape scale.

10. Western Governors urge FEMA to make Individual Assistance more accessible for communities affected by wildfire disasters. In addition, Western Governors encourage federal agencies to work directly with individual states and territories to identify their disaster risks and needs, and to reconsider the important role played by pre-disaster mitigation efforts, particularly for wildfires.

C. GOVERNORS’ MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVE

1. The Governors direct WGA staff to work with Congressional committees of jurisdiction, the Executive Branch, and other entities, where appropriate, to achieve the objectives of
this resolution.

2. Furthermore, the Governors direct WGA staff to consult with the Staff Advisory Council regarding its efforts to realize the objectives of this resolution and to keep the Governors apprised of its progress in this regard.

*Western Governors enact new policy resolutions and amend existing resolutions on a bi-annual basis. Please consult [www.westgov.org/policies](http://www.westgov.org/policies) for the most current copy of a resolution and a list of all current WGA policy resolutions.*