

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
MANUAL TRANSMITTAL SHEET

Release
6-135

Date
7/13/2012

Subject
6340 – Management of Designated Wilderness Areas (Public)

Fire

a. **Background.** This section of the manual is not meant to stand alone and supplements BLM fire management policies and techniques not repeated here.

i. The overall goal of managing fire in wilderness is to allow the frequency and intensity of an ecosystem's natural fire regime to play its inherent role in that ecosystem. This means both allowing fire where ecosystems evolved in the presence of fire and preventing unnatural spread of fire in ecosystems that evolved without broad-scale fires. See also 1.6.C.15.f. The overall goal may be affected by management constraints including budgets and national fire management demands.

ii. The principles described in this manual will continue to apply even as fire management terminology changes over time.

b. **Wildfires.** These are unplanned ignitions or prescribed fires that are subsequently declared to be wildfires because they exceed the prescription parameters.

i. Wildfires can be controlled under Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act, which dictates that "such measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire...subject to such conditions as the Secretary deems desirable." To the extent possible, all fires in wilderness will:

A. be managed using minimum impact suppression techniques wherever possible while providing for the safety of firefighters and the public and meeting fire management objectives.

B. be managed, if feasible, without equipment that would ordinarily be prohibited by Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act. For examples of such equipment, see section 1.6.B of this manual.

C. have a resource advisor with knowledge and experience in wilderness stewardship assigned to the firefighting team to assist in the protection of wilderness character.

ii. The management response to a wildfire within a wilderness may vary along a continuum from monitoring to suppression according to objectives outlined in the applicable Resource Management Plan, Wilderness Management Plan, or Fire Management Plan. The management response to a fire can change due to variations in weather, topography, fuels, and resources available. Responses involving prohibited uses described in section 1.6.B.2 of this manual must be authorized by the applicable BLM State Director unless this authority has been delegated to the District or Field Manager.

iii. Stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration of impacts to wilderness from wildfires should be conducted as part of the fire incident. Where wildfires have been managed for resource benefits, most stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration activities are expected to be limited to the effects from suppression actions. Any stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration activities are likely to be more intensive where the effects of the fire were greater than would be expected from the natural fire regime. Any stabilization, rehabilitation, and restoration should seek to establish, or re-establish, the natural vegetative community.

c. **Prescribed fires.** These are fires—otherwise known as "planned ignitions"—that are ignited by the BLM. The goal of prescribed fires is to make conditions possible for natural wildfire to return to the wilderness.

i. Prescribed fires can be used in wildernesses only to clearly enhance the land's wilderness values, including restoring natural vegetative communities. Generally, enhancing wilderness values means reestablishing the natural role of wildfire where both the following conditions are met:

A. the natural role of wildfire cannot be returned solely by reliance on wildfire, or, relying on wildfires might create unacceptable risks to life, property, or natural resources outside the wilderness; and

B. the use of wildland fire or other fuel reduction treatments outside of wilderness is not sufficient to reduce the risks from wildfire within the wilderness to life, property, or natural resources outside the wilderness.

ii. Except as necessary to control exotic species or contribute to the survival of threatened or endangered species, or species for which Federal protection has been found to be warranted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, prescribed fire cannot be used to enhance specific wildlife species, specific vegetative types, or forage production, although secondary effects to these resources may occur. As noted above, however, prescribed fire may be used to restore natural vegetative communities.

d. **Fuel treatment.** This includes thinning or removing native vegetation, either mechanically or chemically, in advance of, or as a replacement for, wildland fire (either wildfire or prescribed fire). The goal of fuel treatment is to make conditions possible for wildfire to return to the wilderness where past management practices have reduced the historic frequency and intensity of wildfire.

i. Fuel treatment is not allowed in wilderness, except in rare circumstances. Due to the controversial nature of fuel treatments and the complexities of analyzing the effects of these on the totality of wilderness character, when they are to be used as a replacement for wildland fire they may require analysis through an EIS. Fuel treatments *may* be permitted:

A. To remove non-native vegetation (see also section 1.6.C.15); or

B. When prescribed fire without pretreatment in the wilderness will inevitably cause unacceptable risks to life, property, or wilderness character (including cultural resources, as outlined in 1.6.C.5.f); or

C. When any wildland fire will inevitably cause unacceptable risks to life, property, or wilderness character.

ii. Because it more closely mimics a natural wildfire event, repeated low-intensity prescribed fires are preferable in most circumstances where fuel treatment is contemplated. This is true even if this increases the time and cost of treatment, or would necessitate burning at a different time of year as long as other impacts to the Natural quality of wilderness character can be sufficiently mitigated.