

Prescribed Burn Guidance

Erica Dickerman
Recreation Specialist
Swan Lake Ranger District, Flathead National Forest

I. Policy and Rationale

As stated in the Forest Service Manual (FSM 2324.21):

Forest Service managers may ignite a prescribed fire in wilderness to reduce unnatural buildups of fuels only if necessary to meet at least one of the wilderness fire management objectives set forth in FSM 2324.21 and if all of the following conditions are met:

- a. The use of prescribed fire or other fuel treatment measures outside of wilderness is not sufficient to achieve fire management objectives within wilderness.
- b. An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists has evaluated and recommended the proposed use of prescribed fire.
- c. The interested public has been involved appropriately in the decision.
- d. Lightning-caused fires cannot be allowed to burn because they will pose serious threats to life and/or property within wilderness or to life, property, or natural resources outside of wilderness.

The objectives set forth in FSM 2324.21 are:

1. Permit lightning caused fires to play, as nearly as possible, their natural ecological role within wilderness.
2. Reduce, to an acceptable level, the risks and consequences of wildfire within wilderness or escaping from wilderness.

The fire management direction for the Mission Mountains Wilderness is to suppress all wildfire starts prior to September 1st. This direction is set forth due to the likelihood of fires escaping the wilderness area, a condition inherent to the configuration of the wilderness. The opportunity to capitalize on natural ignitions for wildland fire use is limited. Therefore, the Mission Upland Burn Project looks to reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire within wilderness or escaping from wilderness through prescribed burning (objective 2).

The ability to address the wildfire risks contained within the Wilderness cannot be achieved strictly through treatments to areas outside of wilderness. Historical suppression of natural starts has caused the accumulation of downed woody material within the wilderness. As these fuels need to be addressed in order to achieve fire management objectives, it is necessary to treat the fuels where they are located.

An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists has evaluated and recommended the proposed use of prescribed fire. Documentation of these decisions can be found in the Mission Upland Burn specialist reports. As part of the NEPA process for this project, the public was solicited for comment through scoping letters and public meetings.

Finally, the ability to allow lightning caused fires when they occur is severely limited due to the nature of the topography and area boundaries of the wilderness and the proximity of life, property, or natural resources outside of wilderness.

II. Wilderness Act, Forest Service Direction, and Special Provisions

As stated in the Wilderness Act of 1964 wilderness shall be managed following these purposes: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Where wilderness is “protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation...and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

Additionally, “except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.”

Yet as a special provision the Act states “the use of aircraft or motorboats, where these uses have already become established, may be permitted to continue subject to such restrictions as the Secretary of Agriculture deems desirable. In addition, such measures may be taken as may be necessary in the control of fire, insects, and diseases, subject to such conditions as the Secretary deems desirable.”

Further management direction is stated in the Forest Service Manual (FSM 2320.2) which includes two objectives in the administration of wilderness:

2. Maintain wilderness in such a manner that ecosystems are unaffected by human manipulation and influences so that plants and animals develop and respond to natural forces.

4. Protect and perpetuate wilderness character and public values including, but not limited to, opportunities for scientific study, education, solitude, physical and mental challenge and stimulation, inspiration, and primitive recreation experiences.

The Forest Service direction identifies four qualities related to wilderness character: untrammled, natural, undeveloped, and outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation¹.

As designated in the Wilderness Act, “nothing in this Act shall be deemed to be in interference with the purpose for which national forests are established as set forth in the Act of June 4, 1897 (30 Stat. 11), and the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of June 12, 1960 (74 Stat. 215) (16 U.S.C. 528-531).” To this end, wilderness is managed by several Acts and policy direction alongside the Wilderness Act.

This project addresses the second objective as provided in Forest Service administrative direction FSM 2320.2. Legacy fire suppression policy has created a non-natural fire regime within the Missions Mountain Wilderness. As noted in the Flathead National Forest Guidebook to the Wildland Fire Use, approximately 50% of the lands within the wilderness are in moderately to substantially altered fire regimes-- where the risk of losing key ecosystem components is moderate to high. By suppressing wildfire starts, the Forest Service has manipulated the ecosystem and created a landscape altered by human forces, versus the natural forces that should preside in wilderness. Reintroducing fire will address the core goal of preventing loss of life and property, but will additionally work towards other management goals.

As set forth in the Wilderness Act, management should preserve wilderness character as well as be devoted to the public purposes. This project will affect the naturalness component of wilderness character, where establishing a fire regime based on historical returns will allow the wilderness to return to a more natural balance. Conservation implies benefit to natural conditions and natural function of ecological processes within the historical range of variability. Previous management activities has affected the conservation value as natural systems have been impaired by modern human activity.

Action is needed within the wilderness to address fire management concerns. The control of fire is a specific provision within The Wilderness Act; additionally the Forest Service provides bases upon which decisions can be made. The Mission Upland Burn Project meets the criteria for prescribed burning in wilderness.

¹ Framework, RMRS-GTR-151, April 2005. A Framework which “improves wilderness stewardship by more clearly articulating what wilderness character means, which may help managers evaluate proposed actions...”