

Society of American Foresters

Sustainable Management of Federal Lands

Maintaining the health and resiliency of our nation's federal forests is critical both to human wellbeing and the natural ecological functioning of these lands, including wildlife and biological diversity. These forests provide myriad of benefits, including clean water, clean air, wildlife habitat, recreation, forest products, carbon sequestration and many others. Such benefits can be put at risk when these forests are threatened by natural and human induced stresses.

Today, more than 190 million acres of federal forests are threatened by a potent combination of wildfire, insects, diseases, invasive species, climate change, and other factors. Overly dense forests, particularly in southern and western states, create the potential for insect epidemics and stand-replacing fires beyond the capabilities of local resources.

One of the most viable approaches to address these threats is active management of forests, including thinning overly dense forests and using prescribed fire, to restore the ecological health and resiliency of forests currently in an unhealthy condition. These activities can also create green jobs in rural communities and provide products and biofuels to help offset fossil fuel consumption.

Annual fuels treatment and restoration activities on federal lands have ramped up from about one million acres in 2000 to four million acres or more per year in 2004-2007, but this is not nearly enough. For example, according to The Nature Conservancy, three to five times more management activity is needed to protect ecological values on federal lands in Oregon, where the agencies are treating an average of 156,000 acres per year while 13.4 million acres of federal lands are at high or moderate risk. Similar increases are needed in most western and southern states. Federal agencies should be encouraged to fully utilize all available tools and authorities, including provisions of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, categorical exclusions from NEPA environmental analysis on small projects, and stewardship contracting authorities.

The removal of commercially valuable timber from federal lands, where appropriate, is a critical tool to improve ecosystem conditions, sustain jobs in rural communities, and generate economic returns for the federal government. Biomass removal would also help improve local economies in rural areas and provide a stable forest management workforce that could do double duty as trained firefighters.

The barriers that inhibit restoration activities on federal lands must be overcome to help sustain the values people expect from these lands. The combination of agency inefficiencies; conflicting and unnecessary laws, regulations, and policies; and funding shortages have resulted in a management paralysis on federal lands. Unless these problems are resolved, it will be difficult to achieve the goals of caring for the land and serving the people of the United States.