

HEALTHY FORESTS INITIATIVE

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Healthy Forests Initiative, announced by President Bush in August 2002, arose from the need to make more timely decisions, provide for greater efficiency, and reduce the catastrophic effects of wildland fires on communities and the environment. It is tied very closely to the National Fire Plan and the 10-year Comprehensive Strategy.

ISSUES:

Forest fuels have accumulated so significantly that fires no longer burn at natural temperatures or rates. The fires have a long-term effect and a significant impact on vegetation, soil, water, and wildlife resources. Federal, state, tribal and local governments are making unprecedented efforts to reduce the build-up of fuels and restore forest and rangelands to healthy conditions.

Each summer, thousands of acres are burned by wildland fires in the Northern Rockies. The larger fires require significant suppression efforts by incident command teams, miscellaneous overhead, wildland fire suppression crews, and aircraft and heavy equipment operations. Communities and residents near these fires are faced with potential loss of property and forced evacuations. Drought, epidemic insect outbreaks, and increasing woody fuel loadings are contributing factors.

The National Fire Plan, which was adopted in May 2002 by federal agencies and western governors in collaboration with county commissioners, state foresters, and tribal officials, calls for more active forest and rangeland management. It establishes a framework for protecting communities and the environment through local collaboration on thinning, planned burns, and forest restoration projects.

President Bush is also working with Congress on legislative changes designed to help federal agencies accomplish more timely, efficient, and effective implementation of forest health projects.

The Horsethief Hazard Fuels Reduction Project near Roundup, Montana, is one of 10 pilot projects based on guidance issued in December 2002 on the preparation of environmental assessments for forest-health projects (see *Horsethief Hazard* briefing paper for details.) Other administrative efforts announced in December 2002 include proposed changes in the regulations to: 1) "categorically exclude" certain fuels treatment projects on public lands from further environmental analysis in order to speed the implementation of projects; and 2) to clarify and expedite administrative review procedures.

In 2003, Public Law 105-277 was amended in order to provide Stewardship End Result Contracting authority to the BLM. This tool provides the Bureau with a mechanism to apply the values of timber and other forest products as an offset against the cost of services received on an approved stewardship project. It also provides an opportunity for multi-party monitoring of the project. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which the president signed in December 2003, is another means to focus agency efforts on fuels management.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

Director Kathleen Clarke supports this initiative. She states it will provide for expedited environmental reviews and full public review processes, while ensuring that the projects are carried out efficiently and effectively. She also believes it will preserve the principle of partnerships with local communities and local interests through the use of collaborative processes that include all stakeholders and partners at the local level.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Public interest is high now and we expect it to remain high as the initiative moves forward. There is much support for measures outlined in the initiative, but there is also much opposition to some measures.

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