

PFMc Presentation

Black Fire, Gila National Forest, and Aldo Leopold Wilderness

Region 3, USDA Forest Service

Narrative for the 38 slides

1. Blank Logo Slide

2. PFMc Contact Information Slide

3. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore told us he would “pause” prescribed burning for 90 days pending a review of policies and practices that resulted in the Hermit’s Peak and Calf Canyon wildfires. The thing is, he had his fingers crossed, and not how you’d expect. He paused actual planned prescribed burning but he did not pause deferred fire suppression using a contain and control strategy to manage fires to achieve resource benefits.

4. Managing wildfires for resource objectives and ecological purposes refers to a strategic choice to use unplanned ignitions (human or natural) to achieve resource management objectives. Federal fire policies traditionally restricted use to Federal wilderness areas, national parks, or other remote areas under specific conditions or circumstances. These restrictions were intended to reduce risk and avoid potentially negative impacts or consequences to lands of other ownership. Guidance issued in 2009 has led to expanded application of this method to manage wildland fuels. In contrast, most state and local jurisdictions are statutorily constrained to provide full wildfire suppression due to values at risk, human-caused fires, and protection of private lands.

5. California noticed the new federal fire policy that began in 2009 in a formal declaration and has evolved in often surprising and even humorous ways ever since. The bottom line is that California asked Randy Moore to quit failing to fight fire. Having firefighters on the ground is not the same as firefighting. The Forest Service is intentionally burning vast acreages to “return fire to fire-depleted ecosystems.”

6. If the location is right, if extreme weather is not predicted, and if the appropriate resources are on hand to help should anything go awry, allowing wildfires to burn naturally—with viable fire lines established ahead of time—could be the best way to accomplish widespread forest management. When Amanda wrote this article for Science and The Atlantic Magazin,e she was not aware that fire managers had no intention of following all of her carefully stated conditions for wildfire use. To the contrary, under the guise of firefighter safety and “values at risk,” fire leadership is establishing lines at state highways, lake shores, mountain chains, and the ocean to use modern technology including fire drones, UAVs with ignition devices on board, to light lots of fire intentionally. This practice is already happening in many places through what is called “wildfire management” versus wildfire suppression. “These fires are allowed to burn under non-extreme conditions and in places far enough from communities and infrastructure that they pose very little risk, with firefighters on standby should they need to be managed,” Amanda wrote. She didn’t understand that none of her conditions have to be met before firefighters are lighting more fire at virtually every wildfire.

7. Michael Rains has said that very few, if any, fire teams have the skills and experience to accomplish these lofty goals, never mind the implementation on the ground. None of these conditions existed in the Hermit’s Peak and calf Canyon Fires, and these conditions were only nominally met on the Black Fire.

8. The Black Fire offered firefighters a unique opportunity to defer fire suppression and, instead, allow the fire to burn, and encourage the fire to burn, and help the fire burn across the Gila National Forest and, particularly, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, an area that had not experienced widespread burning for more than 100 years.

9. **The Forest Service characterizes this strategy as, among other things, “Acceptance of increased short-term risk.”** Significantly reducing fuels across broad landscapes will require expanded use of wildland fire to achieve management objectives. Using fire as a tool carries inherent risks that must be considered in the short-term to achieve the longer-term benefits.

10. **Greater collective investment.** Even with greater efficiency and acceptance of short-term risk, current levels of investment may be inadequate to achieve the levels of risk reduction desired. All who have a stake in the outcome, from individual property owners to the Federal government, must share the financial burden. Unfortunately, the people who are harmed by this unilateral action from Forest Service burners are not insured for sharing the financial burden of managed fires. Firefighters light the country on fire for hundreds of square miles and then go home, yesterday’s fires a dim memory soon replaced by the next big fire rodeo. The Forest Service is not authorized or funded to compensate people harmed by Forest Service actions. And the people who are harmed are never adequately insured against these harms because it’s simply not possible in today’s world including sky high insurance premiums and limited insurance company liabilities.

11. Managing wildfire for resource objectives and ecological purposes refers to a strategic choice to use unplanned ignitions to achieve resource management objectives. Federal fire policies traditionally restricted use to Federal wilderness areas, national parks, or other remote areas under specific conditions or circumstances. These restrictions were intended to reduce risk and avoid potentially negative impacts or consequences to lands of other ownership. Guidance issued in 2009 has led to expanded application of this method to manage wildland fuels. In contrast, most state and local jurisdictions are statutorily constrained to provide full wildfire suppression due to values at risk, human-caused fires, and protection of private lands.

12. Like prescribed fire, allowing wildfires to burn for the purposes of ecosystem restoration or hazard reduction has inherent risks. These risks must be balanced with the potential benefits on an individual incident basis, which requires both pre-incident planning at the landscape scale and sophisticated incident management. In light of the Forest Service report on the mistakes firefighters made in handling Hermit’s Peak and Calf Canyon, this picture perhaps perfectly illustrates the agency’s attitudes about wildfire use and managed fire. Their claims that they don’t accept acceptable risks are simply laughable. Winston Churchill wrote that “**It is not right to condemn operations of war simply because they involve risk and uncertainty.** No lessons can be so inculcated by the experience of life save that you should never trust experts If you believe doctors, nothing is wholesome. If you believe theologians, nothing is innocent. If you believe engineers, nothing is safe. Firefighters accept the risks of fighting fire and doing it as safely as is reasonably possible. Arguing that it is safer to let the Tamarack Fire burn than to put it out when it was a small snag fire in the wilderness probed untrue and unwise. The fire blew up and burned across two states and multiple communities. Nor is there safety for firefighters or the public in letting these huge fire “come to us,” as the firefighters say. The mental toll, the toll on physical health and well-being, the toll on equipment and on community and other agency resources is simply unacceptable. If the grand strategists in the Forest Service were operating only in their own sandbox it would still be unacceptable to destroy the public resources aver which they are stewards.

13. On May 20, 2022, the Black Fire was mapped by Wildfire Today in this configuration with the red dots representing hot spots and the fire edge. Active firing operations were taking place on several flanks of the fire.

14. By May 28 following extensive firing operations using fire drones and other aerial ignition methods, the pattern began to clarify for observers who understood that the live fire edges were intentionally lit.

15. According to their own fire posts, the Forest Service “fought” the Black Fire from the comfort of a fire drone office. Drones give firefighters huge capabilities to gather intelligence, and to burn far from any on-the-ground observation.

16. The temptation to do everything from the air and allow the fire to ”come to the firefighters” is overwhelming. In this case, the drones allowed fire leaders to conceive and implement a bold and risky plan to lay fire down across all of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness and much of the Gila, all without committing any firefighters to direct control of the fire. The plan was almost perfectly executed, stymied in the end by the summer monsoons.

17. These same drones lit more than 200,000 acres of the Black Fire to do some good. Forest officers told New Mexico legislators and county commissioners that the “ranchers loved it” and were excited for the new forage and cleaned up forest floor.

18. This is a drone operation along a ridgeline above the main fire. In a normal indirect attack, firefighters fall back to the next best ridge and light it to deny fuel to the main fire. On the Black Fire, firefighters fell back to the two state highways and little villages like Kingston and Mimbres and tried to burn more than 250,000 acres between the highways and the fire.

19. These are not spot fires to the south of the main fire. These are the drone fires started by drone operators in their mobile office at the incident command post. This was the largest and most consequential firing operation in 2022 to date. There was no pretense in the firing operation about suppressing the fire and preparing for the next fire. This firing operation was a giant big box and burn, using a managed wildfire for resource management, in this case, reducing fuels, introducing fire to fire-dependent ecosystems, and opening the forest understory. Ponderosa pines need fire to be healthy and this operation burned square miles of PIPO ponderosa pines in a very dry forest type.

20. Here is a closer view. Note how carefully these fires were located. The little spots inside the wilderness are designed to draw the bigger spots to them to keep the fire from running at the private lands to the south.

21. The pace of this operation quickened as the Forest Service raced against the coming monsoons to get as much of the public forestland burned as possible.

22. Another view a few days later.

23. More lighting and ever widening fire perimeter. These acres were reported everyday on the Incident Command System form 209 as acres of fire growth in a 24 hour period. Note that the fire is not growing because it’s an out of control wildfire. It is growing because it’s being lit by drones on purpose.

24. At the end of the day, the National Interagency Fire Center collects all of the data from the various forms and dutifully redraws the “wildfire perimeter” to accommodate the burning.

25. Another close up view of the spots and the method used by NIFC to report fire size. Notice that we are not witnessing a phenomenon of climate change. This is a massive prescribed fire, lit intentionally, and prepared far in advance. The agency contracted with drone owners and operators, bought thousands of cases of “ping pong balls,” small plastic spheres containing substances that ignite when missed together just before being dropped by the drone, and got ready for this fire season months and years in advance of the actual firing operations. This is a premeditated and intentional, major federal action. There is no attempt to follow any of the laws that require the agency to disclose the effects of these major federal actions. This is a back room, dark-of-night op and is illegal.

26. They were so close to getting a black line all abound the central wilderness so they could then light the center of the donut. Then the rains came and the the machinery of the wildfire industrial complex wore out and the fire wound down.

27. An observer who didn’t know better would think the Black Fire burned in this pattern as a matter of chance, just a big bad wildfire in the middle of a climate crisis. It did not burn by chance.

28. This remarkable map, when compared to the firing operations maps, show the extent of this remarkable use of wildfire for management purposes.

29. The application of this new sophisticated policy is like a scene from a Quentin Tarantino movie. The Forest Service calls in the Sheriff who blocks the highway with lots of deputies. Then burners with drones or in vehicles walk, run, or drive along highways and lake shores lighting everything on fire as fast as they can to take advantage of the fire.

30. The firing devices available to the Agency are legion. Hand-held drip torches, helicopter born drip torches

31. Shoulder weapons with big flaming cannisters, hand grenades. Literally hand thrown ignition grenades that blow up like a big firecracker but burn longer.

32. The latest deal is sophisticated drones outfitted with incendiaries. They can burn for miles using drones and they are. And, of course, everyone carries a very pistol or sausage gun as they call it. This image of a troop loaded with bandoliers of very pistol shells was unthinkable a decade ago. At least one person and often many more on each crew now carry this kind of equipment.

33. They burn day and night. The drones are not limited by hours of the day or night or visibility. They fly with infrared, and they can operate 24 hours.

34. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore is fond of saying they catch 98 percent of all fires when they’re small. He’s not comparing apples to apples. The purposefully burn almost 100 percent of big fires to make them bigger and they have never studied the effects or revealed the impacts of this policy. They are literally seizing private property for public purposes and no one can challenge their “emergency” decisions.

35. If you want a peek inside the minds of the new wildfire service, go to social media and look at the tags they include with their “hero photos” of their firing operations. Hold the line and burn it all is a great summary of what the Forest Service means by contain and control and “full suppression.”

36. This is a big box on the Hermit’s Peak Fire above the old Apache Fire where they used a couple of FS dirt roads as fire lines. They lit the flanks all around, but rain stopped the middle from burning. Firefighters don’t like ragged edges. They draw straight lines and fill in the middle with fire.

37. Politics makes strange bedfellows. Kamala Harris’ husband officiated at Governor Lujan Grisham’s wedding. Yet, she is now on the opposite side of the Biden Administration despite her recent agreement to collaborate with the Forest Service. When the reality of “managed fire” hit home, she became a proponent of forest management, and that’s a win for all of us.

38. The new bear in the woods is a fire bear bringing a message of deferred fire suppression and managing large fires for resource benefits. Whether this approach is wise or not, it has never passed public scrutiny, never been vetted through the Administrative Procedures Act, and in no way comports with the other administrative and substantive laws that govern premeditated and preplanned, major and significant federal actions. Arguably, the new wildfire use paradigm of the Forest Service is the most significant and most consequential federal environmental action in the entire history or our public wildlands.