

NASF Resolution No. 2007-1

ORIGIN OF RESOLUTION:

Forest Fire Protection Committee

ISSUE OF CONCERN:

The role that climate change plays in the severity and size of wildland fires is not explicitly recognized in the “National Fire Plan” and the Implementation Plan for its 10-Year Strategy.

BACKGROUND:

Under NASF Resolution No. 2005-3, it was noted that “As a consequence of decades of fuel accumulation in our nation’s forests and rangelands, coupled with persistent drought, state and federal fire managers are faced with larger, more explosive and more costly wildfires than in any period in history. Catastrophic wildfire is a growing national issue, demonstrated by the Florida wildfires in 1998 and 1999 and in many Western states over the past five years. Between 2000 and 2004, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Oregon, Montana, Washington, Wyoming, California, South Dakota, Nevada, Utah and Alaska all experienced severe fire seasons that set new benchmarks in terms of damages, losses and cost.”

Dry conditions throughout the United States fueled wildfires that burned in 2005 and 2006, sparking more discussion about the causes and management of the fires. From 1998 to 2005, the amount of acreage burned by wildfire quadrupled. From January through March 2006, drought and high winds across the southern United States created prime conditions for grass fires, which burned about a million acres in Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. The severity of the 2006 fire season continued across much of the west during the summer months resulting in 97,000 wildfires burning almost 10 million acres in the U.S. for the calendar year.

Record-setting fires continued in 2007. Between April and late June, 2007, Georgia experienced the largest wildfire in its history. The wildfires started in the Okefenokee Swamp, most of which is located in Georgia. By mid-May, this fire spread over the Florida border and became the largest fire in Florida's history as well. Cumulatively, about 600,000 acres of land were burned. The fires were reportedly fueled by high winds, and low humidity along with drought conditions. Many western states including Montana, Utah, Nevada, and Idaho continue to experience above normal fire potential resulting in a number of large fires. Through August 8, 2007 over 59,000 wildfires have burned over 5.5 million acres. The number of fires and acres burned to date are already higher than the 10-year average for the entire calendar year.

The trend of new benchmark-setting fire seasons in the United States has continued. The precise impact of climate change on forest fire is unknown. However, in April 6, 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest assessment of climate change impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. For North America, the report states with “very high confidence” that “disturbances from pests, diseases, and fire are projected to have increasing impacts on forests, with an extended period of high fire risk and large increases in area burned.” Also, the lack of on-the-ground natural resource management activities on public lands continues to increase forest fuel loadings.

In addition, another study¹ tied the increase of large wildfires in the western United States to rising seasonal temperatures and the earlier arrival of spring conditions. For each year studied, the number and

¹ These findings are in a 2006 study led by scientists at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego that correlated rising seasonal temperatures and the earlier arrival of spring conditions in connection with a dramatic increase of large wildfires in the western United States. Looking at a database of 1,166 forest wildfires from 1970 to 2003 in the western United States, researchers compared the number and potency of wildfires to spring and summer temperatures and the timing of snowmelts. The Scripps study was reported in the journal, *Science*, in July 2006.

total area of major forest fires closely correlated with average spring and summer temperatures and with the date on which snowmelt peaked.

The National Fire Plan was developed in August 2000, following a landmark wildland fire season, to actively respond to severe wildland fires and their impact on communities while ensuring sufficient firefighting capacity for the future.

A 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy was developed for the Fire Plan to reflect the views of a broad cross-section of governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders with the following primary goals: improve prevention and suppression, reduce hazardous fuels, restore fire adapted ecosystem, and promote community assistance.

Climate change potentially affects the first three goals as it potentially affects the duration and the intensity of the causes impacting wildfire and hazardous fuel build-up.

RESOLUTION:

The NASF recommends the following:

- The Wildland Fire Leadership Council should include in its Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Strategy of the National Fire Plan, the task of promulgating new standards for wildland fire management that explicitly addresses the role of climate change in the severity and size wildland fires. This should include, but not limited to, the following:
 - Setting up pathways for information sharing and coordination of climate change adaptation strategies of wildland fire agencies and entities.
 - Developing and incorporating what we know about climate change into long-range wildland fire baseline data and vegetation modeling. This effort should include addressing changes in vegetation as a result of climate change, and the resultant impact on wildland fire occurrence, severity, and size.
- The Wildland Fire Leadership Council's support for continuing ongoing monitoring efforts relative to the relationships of wildfire and climate change.
- Wildland fire agencies should consider climate change and variability when developing long-range wildland fire management plans and strategies including landscape level fuel reduction treatments. Wildland fire agencies at all levels should incorporate the likelihood of more severe fire weather, lengthened wildfire seasons, and larger-sized fires when planning and allocating budgets rather than basing budgets on historical fire experiences.

NASF ACTION:

(X) Approved

DATE OF ACTION:

September 19, 2007