

## WILDLAND AND PRESCRIBED FIRE

### Background

The North Fork has a long and well-documented history of wildland fire. Active large fires visited the North Fork extensively before 1930 in the large fire years of 1910, 1926 and 1929 for example, and before that in the late 1800's. During the period 1930 to 1980, aggressive initial attack and a cooler, moister period reduced large fire occurrence significantly. Since 1980, large fires have again occurred extensively including the Red Bench Fire in 1988, Moose Fire in 2001, and Wedge Canyon and Robert fires in 2003. These recent large fires have shared the same general characteristics: the fire starts at mid to upper elevations in the Whitefish Range; starts occur during extremely hot, dry conditions; the fires escape initial attack; and develop explosive fire runs both fuel driven and wind driven to the east, burning through private lands in the valley bottom across the North Fork River and into Glacier National Park. Some 260,000 acres have burned in the last 30 years in the North Fork including Glacier National Park.

According to Fire Ecologist Steve Barrett, most of the vegetation in the North Fork is spread between three Fire Regime Groups:

- Fire Regime Group III: infrequent occurrence/mixed severity effect – fire frequency averages 50 – 80 years.
- Fire Regime Group IV: infrequent occurrence/stand replacement effect – fire frequency averages 100 – 150 years.
- Fire Regime Group V: very infrequent occurrence/stand replacement effect – fire frequency averages 300 – 500 years.

Based on this assessment, the effects of fire suppression have not significantly altered the fire regime condition classes in the North Fork at this point, and the recent fires in the area are not unprecedented or outside the range of historic variability. Barrett summarized the condition in the North Fork as:

- Fire Regimes are naturally severe: fires are predominately stand replacement events with lesser amounts of mixed severity.
- Natural fire occurrence has increased since the 1980's
- From the standpoint of Wildland Fire Regimes, the North Fork is still in good ecological condition.

With support from the North Fork Landowner's Association and cost-share grants through the North Fork Fire Mitigation Committee, many private landowners in the North Fork have initiated hazardous fuels reduction projects on their own property. These fuel reduction projects allow for a better opportunity to defend structures and improve firefighter safety in the event of fire. In addition, the Flathead National Forest has implemented several projects designed to break up the continuity of fuels adjacent to private lands and primary travel routes. Existing fire "footprints" from the Moose, Wedge Canyon and Robert Fires continue to act as fuel breaks for future wildland fires. This fuel break effect has been demonstrated already as

the Robert Fire (2003) bumped into the fire footprint from the Moose Fire (2001) and failed to spread. This beneficial effect within the footprints from the 2001 – 2003 fires can be expected to last through 2020 to 2025 or so. The Forest has begun fuel treatments within the Red Bench Fire area as those stands have regrown to the point they will carry fire very effectively. The Forest is also planning prescribed fire projects to break up fuel continuity, especially in areas outside the timber base.

The Forest has some latitude in response to wildfire, and some flexibility under the existing Forest Plan to manage natural fire starts for resource benefit. Aggressive initial attack for fires that threaten private lands is still the standard. Other starts can be evaluated based on location, proximity to heavy or continuous fuel loads, time of the season, and other factors to determine an appropriate response.

The pattern of large, stand-replacing fire events in the North Fork threatens private property, structures, and life safety. In addition, large stand replacing fires have the potential to adversely impact watersheds, fisheries, wildlife (especially small mammals and furbearers) including T & E species, and other natural resources including commercial timber stands and plantations. Consequently, while large stand replacing wildfires are a part of natural processes in the North Fork, they are considered undesirable based on the values society places on private lands, structures and natural resources in the area.

### **Fire Management Recommendations in the Whitefish Range**

The Whitefish Range Partnership recognize that federal spending for fuels reduction may be limited in the future, and that private property owners may have to take extra precautions to protect assets. The Partnership makes the following recommendations to the Flathead National Forest concerning fire management in the Whitefish Range:

#### **Fuels Management:**

- Work programmatically with private landowners to continuously educate and provide funding for fuels reduction on private property. This recognizes that private landowners have primary responsibility for defense of their structures.
- Work programmatically to manage fuels on public lands in combination with forest restoration efforts such that there are reasonable opportunities to check the spread of wildfire onto adjoining private lands.
- Modify fuels on National Forest lands using all available tools to reduce fire intensity and spread rates and create shaded fuel breaks in a logical manner in the Wildland Urban Interface around private property and transportation corridors. Emphasis should be given to areas where private landowners have initiated treatment on their own lands and connecting areas of fuels treatment;
- Use cultural treatments and stand tending harvests to reduce surface, ladder and aerial fuels; break up fuel continuity; encourage recruitment and retention of fire resistant

species (western larch, Douglas-fir, etc); and develop diversity of species and size classes to create a mosaic of stands within watersheds.

**Fire Response:**

- Provide for rapid initial attack on new starts that threaten private property;
- Continue collaboration and integration of fire response with other wildland fire agencies, Flathead County, rural and volunteer fire departments and local landowners;
- Consider the need for fire access for initial attack, extended attack, and large project fire management in all decisions regarding road management and road closure. Maintain as much road access for fire response as possible while meeting other resource requirements (T&E species, watershed management, etc).

**Prescribed Fire and Wildland Fire Use**

- Use prescribed fire from both planned and unplanned ignitions, where and when appropriate to modify fuels on National Forest system lands, with emphasis on areas outside the suitable timber base including whitebark pine restoration projects;
  - Maintain latitude through the Forest Plan revision to manage natural fire starts for resource benefit based on site specific information about risk to private land and structures and risk to National Forest resources.
  - Recognize that the opportunities for large scale prescribed fire and wildland fire use fires should be limited due to the risk of escaped fires threatening private and state land and natural resources on the National Forest and other federal lands.
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**Approved by unanimous consensus of the Whitefish Range Partnership on 3/27/2013.**