



NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

Wednesday, October 4, 2000 Jackson Hole Guide.

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2000

Babbitt promises locals will help set fire policy

• Secretary of Interior tours site of Alder Fire.

By Rebecca Huntington
Jackson Hole Guide

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt has promised county governments that they will help decide how to spend millions in federal funds to reduce fire danger on federally-owned lands.

Babbitt visited Grand Teton National Park on Thursday to meet with the National Association of Counties.

County officials said Babbitt told them just what they wanted to hear — that they would be involved in setting priorities for reducing fire danger on neighboring national forest and park lands.

Babbitt told county officials that he expected Congress to approve up to \$1.5 billion in additional funds for the nation's wildfire program. About a half billion would go to increase firefighting resources depleted during the 2000 season's record-breaking wildland fires.

Wildfires scorched more than 6.5 million acres this year — more than two times the 10-year national average, according to federal records.

Babbitt said the remaining \$1 billion would go to reduce fire danger and improve forest health. Babbitt said state and county governments would team up with federal agencies to set spending priorities for that money.

"We're going to have to pick our priorities carefully," he said.

Babbitt said he envisioned the money being awarded as grants for local projects. He also wanted to see locals do the work instead of federal employees, he said.

Babbitt described what he called a new model for managing wildland fire during a short tour at the site of the Alder Fire, which burned about 400 acres at the north end of Jenny Lake last fall.

Park staff described the Alder Fire as a success story and example of how clearing brush, dead trees and other potential fuel from the forest floor can be the best line of defense against a wildfire.

The Alder Fire, which was ignited by lightning, smoldered for several weeks consuming only a few acres despite high winds brought by multiple cold fronts. But after the fire backed slowly down to Jenny Lake, where the landscape provided less shelter, winds kicked the fire into a run toward Jenny Lake Lodge.

Firefighters were able to stop the blaze at the Jenny Lake Loop Road only yards from the lodge.

Len Dems, the park's fire management officer, said what enabled firefighters to stop the fire at the road was clearing work that had been done before the fire began.

Dems showed how dead timber had been gathered into piles — which were slated to be burned once snow had fallen. Also, crews had taken low, dead limbs off of trees to prevent fire from moving from the ground to the tops of trees, where it can spread more rapidly.

Such thinning programs are rarely tested, Dems said.

"This is what works," Dems said. "It

brought the fire back down to the ground and had the fire come in pulses instead of one big wave."

But the program comes with a price tag of about \$500 an acre.

The cost of the program demonstrates why federal, state and county governments will have to set thinning priorities carefully, Babbitt said. Babbitt also pointed to thinning around the Jenny Lake Lodge as an example of how it can be done with minimal impact.

"The forest is still there," he said. "It's not about cutting the forest down."

Dems said crews only cleared dead and downed fuel — not standing, dead trees, which he said provide good wildlife habitat.

Babbitt said thinning is needed to reset the natural fire cycle after a century of fire suppression. "It's going to be a big task to get back to that kind of cycle."

In return, Babbitt asked for the counties' help in creating zoning regulations so people build their homes in defensible spaces.

"Fires are like floods," he said, and people should not build in areas that are likely to burn "just like you don't build in flood plains."



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U.S. Department of the Interior

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PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063
MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2000

Idaho Post Register

9-29-00

Turning to burning to protect forests

Babbitt pledges to call on counties in quest to fireproof the West

BY JENNIFER LANGSTON
Post Register

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK — Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt stood in a forest Thursday that some might call manicured, others more natural.

The sky was open above pine trees spaced 15 feet apart. There were grasses growing in sunny spots and few limbs on the lower parts of the trees.

It's not exactly the thick, green forest that most Americans have grown up with.

However, when a wildfire blew up last fall and started rushing toward Jenny Lake Lodge, it dropped to the ground upon reaching the area that had been artificially thinned by park managers. That allowed firefighters to make a stand and hold it at the road.

Babbitt met there with county leaders to give them assurances that they would be involved in ambitious new plans to thin vast tracts of forest near homes to make them more fire resistant.

The thinned area at Grand Teton probably more closely resembles what forests used to look like before the country decided about a century ago to fight all wildfires. Those small, regular fires cleared out brush and young trees, making forests less likely to turn into infernos.

"It's going to be a big task to get back to that kind of cycle," Babbitt said. "But most Westerners understand this. They're ready now to commit to the process of undoing the hazards we've created."

While there are disagreements over whether commercial logging would help prevent or contribute to another disastrous fire year like this one, almost everyone has begun to agree that some thinning is probably wise to

protect homes in communities sprouting up near the woods.

In the wake of this year's wildfires, Congress is on the verge of appropriating \$1 billion to restore damaged areas, reduce forest fuels and prevent future fires.

Even that won't go very far, Babbitt said, because it can cost \$0 an acre to thin small trees. It's why the government plans for states and local communities to prioritize how that money is spent.

Babbitt also said that fire prevention work should be done by all people, in an effort hearkening back to the Conservation Corps of 1930s.

"We don't want people out there wearing green Forest Service and Park Service uniforms," Babbitt said. "We want community people out there."

Babbitt was short on specifics about how that money would funnel down to local counties and communities. He said some funds would be available to beef up rural fire departments.

He also mentioned economic development grants to local groups that might help organize the fire prevention projects.

County leaders, meeting in Grand Teton for a national convention, said they genuinely welcomed Babbitt's overtures.

Most said people in their counties and towns were more than will-

ing to roll up their sleeves and start working.

Local governments across the West have complained for years that unhealthy forests and an unnatural buildup of fuels have created catastrophic fire risks. They've also been interested in managing surrounding forests more aggressively to create jobs for local loggers and laborers.

George Enneking, a county commissioner from Idaho County, said he was glad to hear Babbitt promise to give local governments a greater voice in addressing forest health and preventing future catastrophic fires.

He said that was an important first step, but he still wasn't sure exactly what those partnerships would look like.

"Talkwise, what I heard today was something I've never heard before," he said. "Whether this will create meaningful jobs, I'm not sure."

County officials also acknowledged that they needed to do their part in controlling how and where people build homes in the woods.

Javier Gonzalez, president-elect of the National Association of Counties, said local governments need to look at their planning and zoning laws. "I think counties will be more proactive in managing growth along these forested areas," he said. "We can be a little smarter."



NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2000

THE WASHINGTON POST

U.S. to Resume 'Prescribed Fires'

Exemptions Granted to Ban on Controlled Burns in West

By EDWARD WALSH

Washington Post Staff Writer

The National Park Service is about to resume setting "prescribed fires" in several locations in the West, a practice that Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt suspended earlier this year after one such fire roared out of control and caused extensive damage in Los Alamos, N.M.

Park Service officials said that in August, Babbitt approved a process for revising the agency's procedures in setting controlled fires on federal land, with the goal of lifting the moratorium against the practice by March 1. In the meantime, Babbitt gave the Park Service the authority to grant exemptions to the moratorium under tightly controlled conditions, they said.

Dick Bahr, a fuel management specialist with the Park Service, said yesterday that the agency has granted exemptions to allow prescribed fires in three locations this year: Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Nevada, Yosemite National Park in California, and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park in California. He said as many as six additional exemptions may be granted this year.

Prescribed burns are intended to clear out downed and standing deadwood and brush that can fuel catastrophic fires.

Bahr said that the timing of the fires will depend on local conditions and the judgment of local Park Service officials but that all of the fires should be completed by Nov. 30, which the Park Service considers the end of the burn season in the West. After that, wet winter weather hampers both natural and man-made fires, he said.

Under guidelines set by the Park Service, the exemptions were granted only for prescribed fires considered high priority but also "low risk and low consequences" should something go wrong, Bahr said. He said the fires will not be set where there are homes or other occupied structures nearby. Local Park Service officials are being

required to have the resources and manpower ready to deal with a "worst case scenario," a policy that was not in place at the time of the disastrous New Mexico fire.

"We don't want any opportunity for a fire to get out and impact homes," Bahr said. "Basically, we don't want another Montana or Cerro Grande."

Cerro Grande is the name of a hill in the Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico near Los Alamos, where a prescribed fire was ignited May 4. High, erratic winds drove the fire beyond the control area toward the city and the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Before the fire was finally contained, it destroyed 235 homes in Los Alamos and burned 47,650 acres.

In response, Babbitt imposed the moratorium on prescribed fires on federal land from just west of the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.

The process that Babbitt set in motion in August involves three stages for refining and implementing new procedures for prescribed fires leading up to the planned lifting of the moratorium in March, Bahr said. He said the new procedures include measures to assess the risk of any fire and the consequences if the unexpected occurs.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, there were 84,960 wildfires that burned almost 7 million acres of land across the United States between Jan. 1 and Oct. 21. A total of 852 structures were destroyed by the fires, which cost almost \$878 million to suppress.

Idaho was the hardest-hit state. It experienced 1,598 fires that burned 1.2 million acres of land, according to data compiled by the center. The next hardest-hit state was Montana, where 2,366 fires scorched 947,819 acres. In Nevada, wildfires covered more than 600,000 acres of land.

In contrast, wildfires have burned 9,069 acres in Virginia and 506 acres in Maryland so far this year, according to the center.

U.S. Backs Tribe, Rejects Gold Mine Proposal

■ **Resources:** Canadian firm has 30 days to appeal federal decision about its plans for an open-pit operation on a desert site that Indians view as sacred.

By TONY PERRY
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SAN DIEGO—The federal government has sided with Native Americans trying to block a proposed 1,600-acre open-pit gold mine on public land in eastern Imperial County that the tribe considers sacred.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which controls the land, has tentatively rejected a Canadian mining company's bid, although the agency has given the firm 30 days in which to appeal.

The case is seen as a major test of a 1996 order by President Clinton that federal agencies show greater sensitivity to the "sacred geography" of Native Americans.

Before that order was issued, federal policy, governed by the Mining Act of 1872, leaned heavily toward granting permission for mining on public property whenever possible.

The Quechan Indian Nation asserts that the rocky, wind-swept area bounded by Picacho Peak, Pilots Knob and Muggins Peak contains the spirits of the Creator and two other mythological figures who passed through the region a thousand years ago. The area is mentioned prominently in Quechan songs.

Glamis Imperial Corp. general manager Gary Boyle said the company expects the Bureau of Land Management and its parent agency, the Department of the Interior, to reject its bid and is prepared to file a federal lawsuit. An earlier lawsuit was thrown out of court in San Diego as premature.

"It's been obvious to the mining industry that the Department of the Interior has been trying to amend the Mining Act of 1872 without the benefit

of legislation," Boyle said. "We have met all the rules for mining operations of this sort."

The site, 45 miles northeast of El Centro, is in the heart of a region that has seen gold mining for more than 100 years. Three of the state's most productive gold mines of the 20th century, the Picacho, Mesquite and American Girl mines, are nearby, all on federal land.

Courtney Coyle, a La Jolla attorney representing the Quechans, called the bureau's tentative ruling "an excellent step in the right direction. Contrary to the noises the mining company is making, BLM is on solid ground."

In its tentative decision, the bureau concluded that the mining operation "would result in significant adverse effects to prehistoric cultural resources, Native American traditional cultural uses and values, and visual resources."

Up to 130,000 tons of rock a day would be mined and deposited in piles. The gold would be coaxed from the ore by bathing mounds in sodium cyanide, a standard industry practice that federal regulators consider safe if done properly.

Glamis Imperial, part of a British Columbia company, had promised to buy 1,600 acres elsewhere in the desert to swap for the right to use the public land. Glamis also volunteered to move one of the ore heaps away from an area called the Trail of Dreams, where Quechans believe that they can communicate with spirits and receive visions.

The company has said there is scant evidence that the Quechans have used

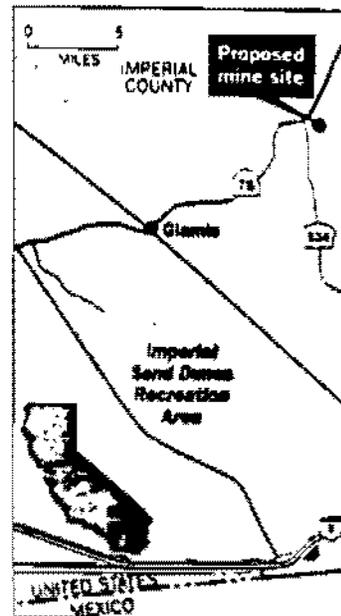
the site for religious observances in the last half-century. But Coyle branded that assertion "a very ethnocentric point of view" because it assumes that land must be visited or built upon to be spiritually important.

On its reservation, the tribe has a casino and an extensive farming operation. The mining pit would be about six miles from the populated part of the reservation.

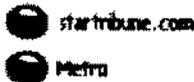
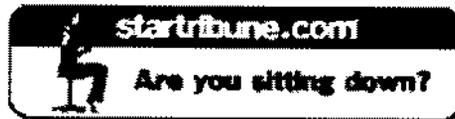
Glamis Imperial has spent seven years and \$14 million preparing to open the mine. The land bureau's current position, to be published today in the Federal Register, signals a shift for the agency, which more than two years ago appeared on the verge of approving the proposal.

Under Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, the bureau has become much tougher on requests by private concerns to use public land for grazing or mining. Babbitt has said that "in the old days, BLM was basically a doormat."

The Imperial Valley case has been reviewed by Interior Department attorney John Leshy, who concluded that the agency has authority under the 1980 California Desert Conservation Area plan to reject the mining request. Leshy's opinion was reviewed and approved by Babbitt.



Los Angeles Times



Published Tuesday, November 14, 2000

Interior secretary tells Indians that education is No. 1 priority

Pat Doyle / Star Tribune

Speaking to the largest American Indian organization, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt told tribal leaders Monday that improving education on reservations will be a top priority no matter who wins the U.S. presidency.

"The single most important opportunity for the coming year is education," he told the 57th annual conference of the National Congress of American Indians in St. Paul. "It's predictable that the next president is going to have an agenda."

He urged tribes to prepare a program to take advantage of money that probably will be available to them for improving Indian education.

"All of us," he told the tribes, "must put together an education budget that is large and expansive."

During the campaign, Vice President Al Gore pledged to strengthen the tribal college system and Texas Gov. George W. Bush proposed spending \$928 million to repair, maintain or replace tribal schools.

Improving Indian education is shaping up as a major issue at the Indian congress' conference this week at RiverCentre in downtown St. Paul. About 300 tribes are expected to attend.

Indian students -- on reservations and in urban schools -- long have had high dropout rates. In Minneapolis, 35 percent of all students who started ninth grade in 1995-96 failed to graduate four years later. Indian students had the highest dropout rate -- 62 percent -- of any racial group in the Minneapolis School District.

In the all-Indian Red Lake School District in northern Minnesota, 45 percent fail to graduate.

Moreover, fewer than half of Indian students are regarded as proficient or advanced at math or language skills, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Education is Babbitt's responsibility because he oversees the BIA, which funds or runs schools on Indian reservations. During the 1998-99 school year, the agency funded 185 schools with 53,441 students in 23 states and 63 reservations. It also helped fund services to 400,000 students in educational programs or colleges.

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The conference will explore ways to narrow the gap between non-Indians and Indians in Internet use and other technical skills.

"If they don't have access to technology, they cannot be competitive," said Susan Masten, president of the Indian congress.

The unsettled presidential election was on the minds of conference participants, and Clinton administration officials used the opportunity to thank them for their support of Democratic causes.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson credited overwhelming support from Navajo and Pueblo voters for helping him win a seat in Congress from New Mexico two decades ago.

Regarding the presidential election, Richardson said, "I have looked at some of the Indian precincts around the country, and as someone who supported the vice president, I'd like to say, thank you once again."

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NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

THE NEW YORK TIMES

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063
TUESDAY, AUGUST 22, 2000

U.S. WEIGHS PLAN TO LIMIT SPREAD OF FOREST FIRES

THINNING OUT THE TREES

Experiment in Arizona May Be Applied Elsewhere in Wake of Devastating Season

By DOUGLAS JEHL *AI*

FLAGSTAFF, ARIZ., Aug. 17 — In the aftermath of blazes that have scorched millions of acres of Western forests this summer, the Clinton administration will try to extend nationwide an experimental effort here to reduce fire dangers by thinning small trees from forests and leaving the largest, most fire-resistant behind.

One draft, being circulated by the Forest Service as enormous fires in Montana and other states continue to burn, calls for thinning, over 15 years, most or all of the 40 million acres of national forest now deemed at high risk of catastrophic fire.

The estimated cost of the plan envisioned by the draft is \$625 million a year, one administration official said.

The administration's reassessment of its approach to wildfires follows criticism from conservatives who say the government should have done more to combat the fire threat in the West, through emergency logging measures advocated by the timber industry.

Administration officials have dismissed that accusation as politically motivated, but appear now to be moving toward broad adoption of a Flagstaff-style alternative in the hope that it will prove acceptable to both the industry and environmental groups.

At least a partial version of the plan could be made public as early as next month, when Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Agriculture Sec-

retary Dan Glickman are to report back to President Clinton with the results of a reassessment prompted by the current fire season, which is on track to become the most devastating in decades.

Administration officials have declined to specify the extent of any new effort, but they have clearly signaled an intention to expand significantly the kind of thinning already under way. They have openly expressed admiration for the experiment being attempted in the dense Ponderosa pine forests outside Flagstaff, where a broad coalition of government, industry and environmental leaders have joined forces behind a costly approach that involves the removal of many small trees while larger, more commercially valuable ones are left behind.

"We really need to scale this up to a significant level," Mr. Babbitt said in an interview.

The Flagstaff experiment was undertaken with federal support in 1998, in response to residents' concerns after forest fires in 1996 drew close to the city. At present, however, it involves only 300 acres.

As evidence of the plan's promise, its architects point to what did and did not happen this June, when one of the season's big blazes swept through Ponderosa pines in a section of the Kaibab National Forest not far away. A stand of pines had previously been thinned to about 10 percent of its former density, with the largest, most fire-resistant among those left behind. As the architects had hoped, that small stand was mostly spared as flames that had been leaping uncontrollably from treetop to treetop dropped to ground level when they reached the test zone.

"I think we have seen from results that are on the ground, if we can reduce the density of trees, we can have a better chance of controlling the wildfires," Jim Golden, forest supervisor in the neighboring Coconino National Forest, said as he escorted a visitor through one test plot.

But the Flagstaff initiative also illustrates the formidable hurdles that may yet lie in the way of an approach that has not fully satisfied either side in a bitter debate, and that would require that a formula be found to make possible the harvest-

ing of unprecedented quantities of low-quality wood.

So far, the most powerful opponents of the Flagstaff experiment are environmental groups that regard the effort as little more than a veil for commercial logging that they say should have no place in the national forests. And though the coalition assembled in support of the plan includes a number of environmental organizations, including the Nature Conservancy and the Grand Canyon Trust, the opponents have successfully sued to limit the total size of the test plots to hundreds of acres rather than the thousands envisioned by advocates.

"We strongly oppose the project as it now stands and will litigate again to stop it," said Bryan Bird, executive director of the Forest Conservation Council of Santa Fe, N.M., one of several groups trying to block the next step in the experiment, which would widen the total test area to more than 5,000 acres.

There is no doubt, fire experts say, that most Western forests have become dangerously overgrown and that thinning them could reduce the risk of a repetition of the current fire season. (On Monday, federal officials said that the amount of land burned by wildfires this year was already well above five million acres and that many blazes in hard-hit states like Montana and Idaho were not likely to be extinguished until the first snows.)

But questions about the scope of such projects, and as a result their cost, remain a source of bitter divisions that are likely to surface even more visibly this fall, as Congress holds hearings about this summer's fires and begins to weigh any administration plan.

Among the critics who have accused the administration of inaction to date is Gov. George W. Bush of Texas, the Republican presidential nominee. In an interview with The Seattle Times on Aug. 12, Mr. Bush said policies that had restricted logging and thinning of underbrush had "made the forests much more dangerous to fire."

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The case is seen as a major test of a 1996 order by President Clinton that federal agencies show greater sensitivity to the "sacred geography" of Native Americans.

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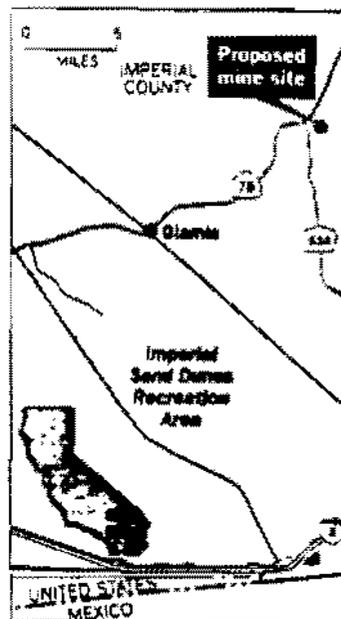
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Los Angeles Times

St. Paul Pioneer Press

St. Paul, Minnesota

May 28, 2000

Disaster in Los Alamos illustrates the concept of a 'moral hazard'

If there is anything that economists agree on, it is that incentives matter. In other words, people's decisions are affected by the rewards or penalties attached to each alternative they consider. Furthermore, incentives are important whether they are monetary or not.

Media and congressional reactions to the recent fire that destroyed or damaged hundreds of homes in Los Alamos, N.M., provide an interesting example of non-monetary incentives. They also illustrate an important idea in economic analysis, that of "moral hazard." Moral hazard exists when a particular set of incentives unintentionally provides motivation for people to do things that are bad for society as a whole.

Let's begin with a common-sense look at the circumstances of the fire itself. Government decisions affected at least two factors: how the fire started; and why the blaze was so intense and spread so fast.

Most media reports on the fire focus on the first question, how it started. Dan Rather, with his usual arrogant pomposity, called it "bureaucratic blundering." In other words, media reports stressed that government resource managers made a mistake when they chose to begin a "prescribed burn" under inappropriate conditions. Various congressmen tut-tutted about incompetence and threatened to hold investigative hearings.

Only a few stories noted the more salient fact that the fire burned as hotly as it did and traveled as quickly as it did because of a decades-long government policy of fire suppression. Suppressing wildfires allows large quantities of fuel to build up, practically guaranteeing that any eventual fire will be abnormally hot. It also ensures that such a fire be able to travel quickly along an unbroken train of tinder.

Government bashers will jump up in glee and say, "Yes, the government screwed up on both accounts." But that conclusion is superficial and premature.

Fire suppression enjoyed near-universal public support for decades. Fuel buildup is as severe a problem on privately owned lands as on public ones. For decades, "protecting" forests by putting out any fires that started seemed as common sense as putting out fires in homes and businesses.

The realization that fire suppression inevitably led to much more destructive fires only developed in the last 30 years or so and met much resistance in public and private forest management sectors. When naturally occurring fires were allowed to burn in well-known public places, such as Yellowstone National Park, criticism was as sharp and immediate as the response to the Los Alamos fire.

Public and private land managers alike learned that the punishments for starting healthy fires, or even letting them burn, far outweigh the rewards for restoration of healthy ecosystems and avoidance of more catastrophic fires over the long run.

Congress' budget priorities contribute to this asymmetry. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are expected to act as if they have a blank check for firefighting, to throw all the resources they have into putting out fires. But Congress allocates inadequate amounts for forest and range management, including people and equipment to safely carry out prescribed burning. To make matters worse, in a season when there are many fires, ongoing resource management budgets frequently are robbed to pay part of firefighting costs.

The upshot is that despite strong scientific evidence that we have too few fires on Federal lands, we still have a policy bias against letting fire play its natural and healthy role. We don't appropriate enough tax dollars to carry out as many prescribed burns as we should nor to do so with enough people and equipment to ensure that things go according to plan.

Reactions to the Los Alamos fire are likely to accentuate that bias. Public and private foresters once again have been impressed with the fact that a badly managed prescribed burn will bring condemnation, punitive disciplinary actions for individuals and monetary liability for the agency or firm involved.

But there will be no similar penalties for allowing fuel to accumulate and forests to become armed bombs. No member of Congress has called for hearings on why excessive fuel has accumulated in many Federal forests. No major newspaper or TV network has criticized chronic underfunding of the BLM and Forest Service.

So how is this "moral hazard?" A common textbook example of moral hazard is life insurance policies without a clause limiting payment in case of immediate suicide. Such policies give depressed or financially pressed individuals an economic incentive to kill themselves. Another is the 1980s U.S. policy of insuring deposits in savings and loans while ignoring increasingly risky loan making. The message to the Kenneth Keatings and Hal Greenwoods was: "Throw more money into the crap game. With a good roll of the dice you will get rich, if you have a poor one, the FSLIC will pay your depositors." That eventually cost U.S. taxpayers some \$200 million.

Congressional and media reactions to the Los Alamos fire involve moral hazard because they motivate resource managers to follow anti-fire policies that are almost guaranteed to result in greater losses of public forests and private property in the long run. Incentives do matter, and the ones coming out of the Los Alamos incident are perverse.



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To Russia for Love

Every year, several thousand American men spend upward of \$4,000 each to join "marriage tours" to the former U.S.S.R.

Learning by Heart

Competition to get on the Delta Vista Academic Decathlon team is so fierce that tryouts are held each spring, and students have been known to cry when they do not make it.

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Federal land managers defend prescribed burns at wild fire summit

By SCOTT SONNER
Associated Press Writer

RENO, Nev. (AP) -- Forest Service officials and the head of the Bureau of Land Management defended prescribed burns Wednesday as a critical component of any strategy to return more natural fire cycles to the West.

"I think the conventional wisdom now is that prescribed fire makes sense and you need to have it," BLM Director Tom Fry said during a break at a wildland fire summit called by Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn.

"While it does have its detractors ... we are past the point where we are questioning whether it is appropriate," he said.

Prescribed or controlled burns are intended to clear out underbrush and reduce fire fuel. The theory is several smaller controlled fires reduce the risk of a large, potentially catastrophic fire.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt suspended all prescribed bush-

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suspended all prescribed bush-clearing fires on department lands until June 12 after one got away last month at Los Alamos, N.M.. The out-of-control blaze scorched about 48,000 acres and left several hundred families homeless.

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"Los Alamos is on a lot of our minds as a nation," said Bob Vaught, supervisor of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest in Nevada, the largest national forest in the Lower 48 states.

"And yet prescribed fire is a necessary part of resource management. It is an important ally we must rely on in order to do the best management," he said in a speech to about 200 firefighters and land managers at the summit.

Babbitt is continuing the ban on prescribed burns on lands managed by the National Park Service. But Fry said the BLM would resume work June 12 on the prescribed fire program with a goal of burning 289,000 acres of BLM lands by the end of the year -- up about 30 percent from last year.

That includes about 8,200 acres in Nevada, nearly double last year's figure. About 23,653 acres have been burned intentionally on BLM lands nationwide so far this year.

"We have targets and goals but it's always a very local operation determined by the weather and other things," Fry said.

Gov. Guinn organized the summit in response to the catastrophic wild fires that burned a record 1.6 million acres of Nevada rangeland last summer -- an area larger than the state of Delaware.

"The conditions of last summer still exist, not only in Nevada but throughout the Great Basin and other Western states," said Bob Abbey, Nevada state BLM director.

Much of the threat in Nevada is because of an invasive annual weed called cheatgrass, which is taking over large areas once covered by sagebrush. Cheatgrass grows fast and burns readily.

"We have a pending environmental crisis on our hands," said Guinn, a Republican who is chairman of natural resources committee for the National Governor's Association.

"Unless we change the current status quo and make strides at reducing fire-prone weed species, we can expect more

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frequent and larger fire events," he said.

"Whatever we do cannot be a short-term solution," Guinn said.

The Forest Service spent \$20 million, the BLM \$30 million and the state of Nevada \$6.1 million fighting the lightning-sparked wild fires that raged across the state last August.

"We were not prepared for such an event," said Cheryl Lyngar, a county commissioner in Lander County, one of the hardest hit areas.

"I don't know how you could be prepared," she said. "It was too big. We had fires we didn't even know where they were."

At the peak of the fires, Interstate 80 was closed in both directions, as were the major roads running through Battle Mountain to the north and south, she said.

"It was scary to contemplate there was nowhere to go," Lyngar said.

Gary Zunino, northern regional manager for the Nevada Division of Forestry based in Elko, Nev., said it was credit to everyone involved that no one was killed in last summer's fires.

"Even though it was a catastrophe, it could have been worse," he said. He said federal managers have been receptive to recommendations that local leaders -- such as mayors and county commissioners -- be included on federal firefighting teams shipped in from out of state.

"The teams were unfamiliar with the terrain and unfamiliar with the local needs of livestock operators," Zunino said.

"A lot of people had never fought fire in sagebrush before. But by the same token, if we didn't have them we would have had nobody," he said.

BACK TO THE

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NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications



PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7, 2000

Forests trimmed to cut risk of fires

In prevention techniques, Flagstaff, Ariz., sets example that other cities might follow

By Patrick O'Driscoll
USA TODAY

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — After an alarmingly early start to this year's wildfire season, the urgent whine of chain saws might become a familiar sound of fire prevention in the inland West.

A 48,000-acre blaze that destroyed more than 220 homes last month in Los Alamos, N.M., joined many who live in the West's woodlands. The talk, from here to the nation's capital, is less about putting out fires than about thinning the dangerously overgrown forests that make such fires explode.

When Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt traveled to New Mexico to admit federal government blame for the Los Alamos fire, he cited Flagstaff, his hometown, as a model for how to protect booming communities on forest boundaries "so that the experience of Los Alamos is not repeated."

In the fire's wake, Congress is drafting emergency legislation for \$115 million for wildfire prevention work. That could include both "prescribed" fires to remove flammable underbrush and the cutting of trees in crowded stands prone to devastating "crown" fires that rain through dense treetops.

Today, Babbitt will return to New Mexico to crusade for fire safety in another potential tinderbox: the steep, overgrown forest drainage where Santa Fe, the state capital, gets its water. Babbitt says that watershed is "at the very top of the list for ... fireproofing."

Fireproofing is an everyday practice in Flagstaff, population 62,000. A gateway city to the Grand Canyon, Flagstaff is surrounded by 1 million acres of Ponderosa pine forest. It's a living laboratory for foresters and wildfire experts who are trying to fireproof the "urban-wildland interface," that risky perimeter where urban sprawl and scenic nature meet. The U.S. Forest Service estimates that as many as 40 million Americans live in such zones across the country.

'Stumps and smoke'

Here and elsewhere, subdivisions creep into the woods. Flagstaff has 17,000 acres of undeveloped forest within its boundaries. But since 1996, when a 16,000-acre wildfire threatened, city fire department crews have "treated" more than 1,500 acres by felling trees to reduce forest density and by setting controlled burns to clear undergrowth.

"If you're not creating stumps and smoke, you're not doing anything to treat this problem on the ground," says Jim Wheeler, Flagstaff's assistant fire chief. His office also promotes fire-safe construction and landscaping around new homes on the forest's doorstep.

"Fire is a definite concern," says Meg Roederer, who lives off Curling Smoke Road in the city's Observatory Mesa highlands. She and her husband, Lance, cleared and thinned their 5-acre parcel before building a 4,500-square-foot dream home last year. The city required them to install fire sprinklers, and they used fire-resistant building materials. "You have to take responsibility and precautions when you choose to live in a wooded area," says Roederer, whose family carries extra insurance and has a fire escape plan.

Most local residents "love seeing us out here," says Mark Shuery, a city firefighter directing a crew of eight workers who felled trees last week in a city park. They give away the logs as free firewood and pile branches and other "slash" for burning in winter, when wildfire danger is low.

Even so, the size of the task is daunting. Wheeler estimates it would take eight years for two year-round crews to finish the needed "fuel management." The city has a single seasonal crew, which works from spring through fall. The General Accounting Office estimates that it would cost \$12 billion to do such work in all the nation's urban-wildland areas.

Advocates for large-scale "restoration" of the overgrown forests have proposed a controversial way to help pay for the work. They want to sell commercially the trees that are thinned out for fire safety.

About 15 local and regional agencies and groups formed the Grand Canyon Forests Partnership to accomplish the work. As a result, the Forest Service issued a proposal to restore 100,000 acres around Flagstaff. The idea is to approximate how the forest was before 19th-century logging, 20th-century overgrazing and decades of fire suppression.

It's based on research by Wally Covington of Northern Arizona University. It suggests that the Southwest's Ponderosa pines once grew in small islands of up to 15 trees, separated by grassy meadows. Beneficial, ground-level wildfires regularly burned through without destroying mature trees in towering infernos so common in today's "crown" fires.

Covington's scenario is to return the woods to scattered pine clusters, anchored by the dwindling "yellowbellies"—huge, centuries-old Ponderosas (named for their pinkish-yel-



Babbitt: Santa Fe is at the top of the list for ... fireproofing.

low bark) that somehow escaped the lumberjack's blade.

"The forest densities have increased 10- to 20-fold," says Covington, a college contemporary of Babbitt. He will lead the Santa Fe tour today.

Environmentalist opposition

Environmental activists appealed the proposal last year and sued in March to stop the project. Although they support limited thinning of forests, most say the planned cuts are too drastic — in some cases, as many as 80% of the trees in an area.

Some contend the plan is a veiled attempt to bring back commercial logging. Others argue that Covington's theory ignores evidence that intense crown fires did, indeed, occur centuries ago. They deride his scenario as "Wally World."

"You can't even pretend it's 'forest restoration' anymore," says local resident Roxane George of the Flagstaff Activist Network, a plaintiff in the lawsuit. "It's plain old logging."

Sam Hirt, founder of Forest Guardians, a Santa Fe-based group that filed the lawsuit, says, "Removing four out of five trees for 100,000 acres around Flagstaff will certainly make the timber industry happy, but it will not protect your home."

Sharon Calbreath, who represents the Southwest Forest Alliance, a coalition of local and regional groups, contends the 100,000-acre zone is far greater than Flagstaff's true urban-wildland zone.

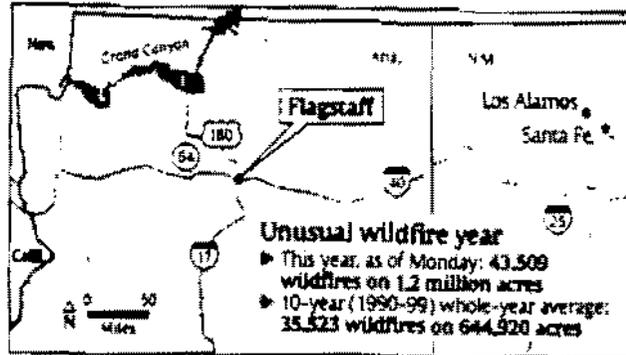
The plots "are in the middle of the national forest, with the nearest house 3-4 miles down the road," she says. "They're fanning the flames of public hysteria about wildfire."

But Covington compares the results of his extensive experiments with thinning and burning to a medical breakthrough during a clinical drug trial: The treatment is "so obviously effective that you can't ethically keep the control group from receiving the treatment, too."

In the wake of the appeals and lawsuit, the Forest Service is redrafting its proposal. That could take months longer, now that fire season is under way.

Extreme fire danger already is closing vast tracts of national forest in Arizona and New Mexico. Potential relief with the region's traditional mid-summer monsoons is at least a month away. And it seems that whenever one major fire is contained, another flares up somewhere else.

Brad Ack of the Grand Canyon Trust, a partnership member, says, "Everybody who is working on the project is out fighting fires."



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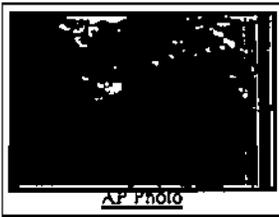
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Friday August 18 7:02 PM ET

Babbitt Vows to Aid Firefighters



By **BOB FICK**, Associated Press Writer

BOISE, Idaho (AP) - With 1.1 million acres ablaze across the West, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said Friday that firefighters have a blank check to draw on the federal Treasury.

But he said no more manpower can be assigned because every available fire crew supervisor is already on the job, including several dozen from Australia and New Zealand.

Sending in more troops, for example, would be futile if no one is trained to supervise their efforts. He said it's up to managers to use existing forces and equipment where they will do the most good.

"We have an open draw on the Treasury," Babbitt said after a briefing at the National Interagency Fire Center.

The money from the Treasury can be used to cover overtime, lodging and transportation for fire crews.

Nearly 19,000 civilian and military firefighters were spread throughout the West - 14,000 of them in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming where most of the active fires burned.

The fire center reported 92 major fires burning in the country on nearly 1.1 million acres.

So far this year, fires have burned 5.22 million acres, the worst fire season in at least a half-century.

"It's a very tough situation," Babbitt said. "We've got two, three more weeks, maybe a month of fire season, and the weather prognosis is not very good."

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In-depth coverage about **Wildfires and Forest Fires**

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- [Current Wildland Fire Information](#) - from the U.S. National Interagency Fire Center.
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- [Wildland Fire Assessment System](#) - get information about fire weather for the United States. Includes fire danger, greenness, and drought maps.

Babbitt declined to estimate the cost of the firefighting effort, which at the end of July was put at \$15 million a day.

The priorities remain firefighter safety and community protection, he said, declining to speculate on any policy changes that may be made to avoid the same kind of fire bust in future years.

"There's going to be lots of time after September 15 to reflect on lessons learned," he said.

In Montana, ranchers on horseback tried to herd cattle out of the way of a 38,000-acre wildfire burning southeast of Helena. Other ranchers cut barbed-wire fences in the hope cattle would find their way to safety, said Ben Hess at the Gallatin County emergency operations center in Bozeman.

People have fled ranch homes but officials said they did not have a count on the number of evacuees, nor did they know how much property was lost. Some homes were destroyed, said Mike Koehnke, disaster and emergency services chief for Broadwater County.

Other huge fires burning across Montana showed little movement.

"The fires have been behaving themselves the last couple of days," Forest Service spokesman Kevin Kennedy said from Hamilton.

In Wyoming, a wildfire that closed the busy southern entrance to Yellowstone National Park was heading into wilderness Friday, but another fire threatened a historic lodge built by Buffalo Bill Cody near the park's east entrance.

Gov. Jim Geringer was expected to declare Wyoming a disaster area because of fires, drought and the resulting financial risk for farmers.

In Idaho, the 147,000-acre Clear Creek fire, the nation's largest, was burning actively as fire crews labored to keep it away from a Girl Scout camp and the watershed for the city of Salmon.

Smoke from the fire that has burned since July 10 prompted the state to declare the air in the Salmon area unhealthy and issue an alert for the elderly, children and those with lung problems to remain indoors.

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NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063

MAY 30 2000

The New York Times

POPULATION SHIFT IN THE WEST RAISES WILDFIRE CONCERNS

LOS ALAMOS A REMINDER

An Increase in Development Adds to the Risk Created by Overgrown Forests

By DOUGLAS JEHLE

WASHINGTON, May 29 — The wildfire that swept through Los Alamos, N.M., this month is setting off alarms across the mountain West, where more and more Americans have chosen to live on the forest's edge.

Experts say that housing shift has multiplied the danger that fires could kindle similar disasters elsewhere. And the shift is behind an urgent new Congressional quest for millions of dollars in emergency money to try to ease the risk.

The blaze in Los Alamos, which consumed hundreds of homes, was a pre-emptive fire gone awry. But in communities like Ashland, Ore., and Missoula, Mont., whose populations have swelled with former city dwellers, the fire has served fresh notice that residents sit astride a volatile mix.

"It's not a matter of if the fire occurs, it's a matter of when," said Paul Summerfelt, a top Fire Department official in Flagstaff, Ariz., which is surrounded by the world's largest forest of Ponderosa pines and where half of the 60,000 residents are said to face a severe wildfire risk.

Across the country, the damage caused by wildfire to homes and property increased sixfold from the 1980's to the 1990's, to a total of \$3.2 billion over the last 10 years, federal officials say. In an average year over the past decade, 1,200 homes burned, more than double the number over the previous decade.

Already this year, more than 40,000 wildfires have consumed more than a million acres, more than in any similar period since 1996.

With the lesson of Los Alamos in mind, Congress and the Clinton administration are working on a plan that would focus an urgent new round of fire-prevention efforts this summer in the danger zones where populations and wild land meet.

"As people get their homes closer and closer to nature, they become more and more at risk," said Kenneth O. Burris Jr., chief operating officer of the United States Fire Administration, which is based in Emmitsburg, Md.

The emergency measure is being drawn up by Senator Jeff Bingaman, Democrat of New Mexico, and other Western lawmakers with help from the Forest Service and other federal agencies. It would nearly double, to \$115 million from \$65 million, the amount of money available to the government this year for efforts intended to prevent wildfires.

In part, the plan would pay for more prescribed fires, like the one that ignited the Los Alamos blaze, in a fiasco for which the federal government has accepted responsibility. It would also emphasize safer but more costly efforts, relying in part on manual cutting and thinning of the dense, overgrown forests that surround many Western mountain communities and lie at the heart of the fire risk.

"The events of the past two weeks in New Mexico demonstrate that we cannot simply allow nature to take its course," Senator Bingaman wrote in a May 19 letter to Mike Dombeck, the Forest Service chief.

Fire, of course, is a natural event, but few Western forests remain in their natural state. Experts say the current fire problem is a legacy of the last 100 years, in which most fires have been suppressed and large trees logged, leaving today's forests unnaturally dense, choked with debris and fire-prone.

Those years of fuel accumulation have made it more likely that even a small fire caused by lightning will spread. That danger is reflected in statistics showing that the number of wildfires that destroy 1,000 acres or more in the United States has increased to a recent average of about 80 a year from 25 a year in 1984.

But there is no doubt, the experts say, that the wildfire problem has been compounded by rapid population growth in the nation's most forested states, particularly by the building of legions of ranchettes, vacation homes and developments near forest boundaries. That trend has added new fronts to the kind of threat that has long plagued places like Southern California, where population growth into remote canyons and hillsides began several decades ago.

For one thing, the proximity of people to forests makes it more likely that a cigarette or a lawn mower spark, for example, might ignite a blaze; an estimated 90 percent of wildfires are caused by humans. Of even more concern, the experts say, is the fact that the presence of houses makes forest fires more difficult to control, because priority is given to protecting property, and more difficult to prevent, because traditional fire-prevention methods like controlled burns are often unpopular with residents.

"We've created a situation in which the forest is like a wood stove," said Andy Stahl, executive director of the Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, a group of 13,000 current and former employees that is based in Eugene, Ore. "We've loaded that stove with paper and shavings ar

sucks and the like, but now it's sitting in the middle of a living room, and we're telling the forest managers, O.K., take care of this stuff, but don't burn the house down."

The Forest Service estimates that the 40 million Americans live in what it calls the "urban/wildland interface," directly adjacent to or scattered within unpopulated areas with wild land vegetation. The agency's estimate does not say how many of those people face a wildfire risk, but separate findings by some fire-prone states leave little doubt that the number is high.

In California and Colorado alone, officials there say, about three million people face at least a moderate wildfire risk, including the many who have built new homes in recent years in areas like the Sierra Nevada foothills in California and Jefferson County, west of Denver.

A study by Dave Theobald, a researcher at Colorado State University, focusing on areas within two miles of forest boundaries found that population densities in those once remote parts of the state had quadrupled from 1960 to 1990, even before the last decade's building boom.

"Clearly, the states with a lot of forests have through most of the last decade shown disproportionate growth and disproportionate home building, and that implies that we're going to have more people living closer to the forest than in the past."

Michael Carliner, an economist with the National Association of Homebuilders.

What happened in Los Alamos has dealt a major setback, at least for now, to prescribed fire, the method most commonly used by federal officials to reduce fire risks on Forest Service and National Park Service lands. In that case, what was to have been a controlled blaze in the Bandelier National Monument quickly spread out of control, ultimately burning more than 46,000 acres.

The 30-day moratorium on such burning imposed by the federal government remains in effect, and last week Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt extended the ban indefinitely on park service land. Across the West, the example is bound to harden local resistance to the setting of blazes like the one in Los Alamos.

The main alternative, the manual trimming of countless commercially worthless small-diameter trees, faces problems of its own. It is so costly that the Forest Service has typically enlisted timber companies to do the work as part of contracts that also allow traditional logging activity. But such arrangements have also tended to stir strong opposition from environmental groups.

For example, in Ashland, Ore., a community popular among wealthy former city dwellers, a Forest Service plan to reduce the risk of a fire

A century of actions that amount to an accumulation of fuel in the forests.

that could cut off the city's water supply has been blocked for the last four years by critics opposed to the fact that it would allow timber companies to carry out new logging.

Frank Carroll, a spokesman for the Potlatch Corporation, a timber company based in Spokane, Wash., criticized such opposition as shortsighted. "We have got to face reality," Mr. Carroll said, "and what's happening now is that various groups are absolutely bent on a course of catastrophe for communities in the West."

As one potential model, some Congressional and administration officials have been looking to a project under way in Flagstaff, where a coalition of government, industry and environmental groups has begun to make a dent in trimming the dense Ponderosa forest that extends even within the city limits.

Even there, however, opposition from groups like the Forest Guardians, an organization based in Santa Fe, N.M., has acted as a brake. The group opposes what it calls the commercialization of the national forests, and its executive director, Rex Wahl, suggested that residents worried about fire danger should not expect someone else to solve the problem for them.

"They move to the forest and then they want to get rid of the forest, because it's being touted as a threat to their property," Mr. Wahl said. "They need to take some responsibility for the danger themselves."



Associated Press

Tom and Gloria Brown walked recently through what remained of their home in Los Alamos, where hundreds of families lost their homes.



NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063

MONDAY, MAY 15, 2000

THE WASHINGTON POST

U.S. Will Aid Victims Of Fire, Babbitt Says

Blaze Continues; Sacred Indian Site Threatened

By GEORGE LARDNER JR.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said yesterday he is confident the government will provide financial aid for Los Alamos, N.M., residents driven from their homes by the runaway blaze that the National Park Service started May 4 as a "controlled burn."

With preliminary damage estimates hovering around \$1 billion, Babbitt said he is sure Congress will provide a "reasonable response" to the devastating fire "whether or not there was negligence" in setting it off.

Under federal law, he added, "if we were negligent, we pay."

The fire has charred 42,000 acres, but the flames closest to Los Alamos were confined yesterday to a few canyons. Forest Service spokesman Charles Jankiewicz said. Firefighters were keeping a close watch on ancient cliff dwellings sacred to area Indians, within a half-mile north of the spreading blaze, and had five bulldozers ready to protect the site.

Winds were lower than expected yesterday, but forecasts for today said they could reach 40 mph. Forest Service spokesman Jim Paxon said the fire was still only 5 percent contained, meaning it was not crossing a fire break line.

Hundreds of evacuated residents solemnly returned yesterday in convoys of yellow school buses to the scared homes, blackened yards and still-smoking vistas of their abandoned town, the Associated Press reported.

The buses left Santa Fe for Los Alamos throughout the day, carrying counselors, clergy and 360 residents up winding roads to the community many left four days earlier. Only those whose homes were destroyed were allowed back into the remote city.

Access was limited, and most visitors were forced to view the damage from the buses as they moved slowly through town. The handful who did get off the bus photographed or videotaped the damage but were told not to get too close.

Judy Opsahl, a 64-year-old Red Cross volunteer whose home was still smoldering, said she was more worried about her neighbors than about her own loss. "We're already starting to think about rebuilding," she said, according to AP.

Speaking in separate interviews on ABC's "This Week" and CNN's "Late Edition," Babbitt said an investigation of what went wrong should be substantially completed by the end of the week. At that point, he said, "we'll be able to . . . put the facts in front of the public and let everybody draw their own conclusions."

National Weather Service officials say they warned officials at Bandelier National Monument—seven hours before the burn was started to clear flammable underbrush—that dry, windy conditions made it an extremely risky exercise. It raged out of control May 5.

The fire, which destroyed or damaged more than 400 homes and forced the evacuation of 25,000 people, is expected to burn for weeks. Babbitt said he believed it was "pretty much out of Los Alamos" by now, but "there's still some danger."

Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the government developed the atomic bomb in the 1940s, showed little damage in an extensive and unprecedented tour of the facilities that officials gave to reporters Saturday. They said air monitors detected no radioactive release.

Accused by anti-nuclear activists of not being candid about the extent of the damage and potential health concerns, lab officials and the Department of Energy arranged the visit to the 42-square-mile area with stops at key installations, including the nation's only active plutonium facility.

"This is an attempt to show you we are not hiding anything," the AP quoted retired Air Force Gen. Eugene Habiger, the DOE's director of security, as saying. "If anyone thinks the government—the Department of Energy—can suppress the truth, they're wrong."

Much of the ground around the plutonium facility, which sits atop a high mesa, was charred, but firefighters evidently stopped the flames about 50 feet short of the high-security fence around the site known as Technical Area 55.

At other points, flames came within several hundred feet of Technical Area 18, a research facility where nuclear experiments are conducted, and Technical Area 54, where nuclear waste materials are temporarily stored.

Some lab workers saw a lesson in the ordeal. "It shows you who's boss," nuclear weapons specialist Tom Turner told the AP at a shelter for evacuees. "We're the elite—we've developed weapons of many megatons that can set off a giant fireball—and now a wildfire sweeps through here and we can't do a thing about it."

Roy Weaver, the Bandelier superintendent who authorized the burn in a 300-acre area, has been placed on indefinite administrative leave, but Babbitt said he was withholding judgment.

"That's the purpose of the investigation," he said. "There are three possibilities here. One is human error—somebody screwed up. The second possibility is that, you know, the standards and guidelines [for conducting a controlled burn] need revision, and the third is that it was an unforeseeable act of God. If mistakes were made, people will be held accountable, there's no question about that."

Babbitt expressed gratitude that no one has been killed or seriously injured. He did not say how much recompense might be forthcoming, but said after talking to members of Congress and the Justice Department "that there's a general feeling out there, which I share, that we've got to do something to make these folks whole."

Staff researcher Nancy Shiner contributed to this report.

Controlled Burning, Out of Control

As almost everyone in the country knows by now, there is nothing exact about the science of "controlled" or "prescribed" burning of forests. It is a time-honored technique for clearing forests of debris and thus preventing even more devastating fires that can incinerate entire landscapes. But there is a thin line between success and failure, and what began as a controlled burn in New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument wound up on the wrong side of that line. Fed by winds gusting higher than 60 miles an hour, the fire jumped its intended boundaries, destroying about 270 homes and forcing the evacuation of 18,000 people in nearby Los Alamos. It also immobilized the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the nation's nuclear weapons are designed.

On Thursday the National Park Service's regional director suspended Roy Weaver, the Bandelier superintendent, who originally ordered the burn, pending an inquiry. Yesterday Bruce Babbitt, the interior secretary, ordered a 30-day moratorium on controlled burns in the West while the investigation proceeds. Mr. Babbitt said it was not yet clear whether the blaze had resulted from human error,

faulty technical guidelines — meaning the government's own rules about how to carry out a prescribed burn — or an unforeseeable act of nature.

What is clear is that nobody should be stampeded into abandoning a policy of controlled burning that, on the whole, has been remarkably successful. The fires are an essential means of heading off devastating accidental fires in forests that have been allowed to grow too dense because for years the government followed a misguided policy of suppressing natural fires. In the last 20 years the Park Service has set 3,783 fires, with only 38 "escapes" — fires that jumped their pre-designed limits. On average, about 2.5 million acres are targeted for controlled burns every year.

Unfortunately, the conditions that encourage a successful controlled burn are not markedly different from those that can cause disaster. A successful controlled burn requires a certain amount of wind and a certain amount of dryness. Too much of both can cause serious problems. The government's task now will be to use whatever lessons can be gleaned from the Los Alamos disaster to make an essentially sound strategy even safer.

COUNTRY IN CRISIS: BLM Initiative Would Restore Great Basin

Thursday, May 4, 2000

BY SANDRA CHEREB
THE ASSOCIATED
PRESS

RENO, Nev. -- Nursing the Great Basin back to ecological health will be a monumental task requiring ongoing commitment from the public, land users and governments as well as long-term funding, range specialists say.

But to do nothing leaves a large chunk of the West prone to devastating wildfires and perpetuates a vicious cycle in which invading weeds and grasses overtake native vegetation, providing volatile tinder for yet more wildfires.

"The bottom line is the Great Basin is in crisis," said Duane Wilson, a range specialist with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The BLM released a report Tuesday titled "The Great Basin: Healing the Land." Prepared by a team of experts, the document is a blueprint for the Great Basin Restoration Initiative, an ambitious concept conceived after wildfires raged across the West last summer.

In Nevada alone, the mostly lightning-sparked fires destroyed more than 1.6 million acres.

The latest report supplements one issued in November that outlined problems challenging the basin's ecosystems.

One of the biggest problems is the invasion of exotic annual grasses, such as cheatgrass, and noxious weeds and perennials, experts say.

The Great Basin stretches for about 900 miles at its longest point and is 570 miles wide, covering 75 million acres in Nevada, Idaho, Utah, Oregon and parts of California.

Scientists say cheatgrass, which grows quickly and is highly flammable, already has claimed about a third of the basin.

"Without quick, decisive action, much of the native grasslands



A portion of the Great Basin near Ely, Nev., is seen from an overlook in the Bristlecone Natural Area in this March photo. The BLM on Tuesday released a report proposing an initiative to nurse the region back to ecological health. (Matt Wilkin/The Associated Press)



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and shrublands burned will be invaded by annual grasses and noxious weeds," the report said.

"The ecological diversity and ability of the land itself to sustain natural resources will be in serious jeopardy. Further, annual grasses . . . mean more fires, more invasions and an acceleration of the entire downward ecological spiral."

The initiative goes beyond restoration of burned areas and emphasizes the need to look at the basin's overall ecological health and other factors that have contributed to its decline over the past 150 years, such as grazing, agriculture and other human encroachment.

But the fix will be neither swift, inexpensive, nor all-encompassing.

"Restoration will not rid the Great Basin of cheatgrass and other annual grasses and noxious weeds. It is already too late for that," the report said.

The goal, however, is to maintain or re-establish healthy plant communities while sustaining wildlife habitat and multiple land uses, such as recreation and grazing.

For the 2001 fiscal year, the BLM is asking for \$2.5 million for the project. The agency hopes to secure \$10 million for each of the next 10 years after that, Wilson said.

"It's not going to be cheap," Wilson said. "If funding is piecemeal, the plan would be doomed to failure."

Members of the BLM's Sierra Front-Northwestern Great Basin Resource Advisory Council were briefed on the plan Tuesday during a meeting in Carson City.

Most agreed the basin's future is at a crossroad, but many said the agency needs to do more than study the issue if it hopes to convince the public -- and Congress, which holds the purse strings -- of the initiative's importance.

"I've seen a lot of sizzle but I haven't seen any steak," Doug Busselman, executive vice president of the Nevada Farm Bureau, said after the BLM presentation.

He said "chasing dollars" for studies and collecting data to find out what scientists don't know wouldn't cut it.

He and others suggested pilot projects that people can identify with.

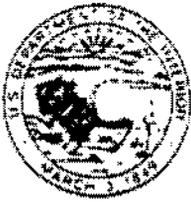
"If you're going to get public support, you need to find a patch of ground," Busselman said.

John Singlaub, manager of the BLM's Carson City field office, noted the agency is undertaking \$40 million in fire rehabilitation efforts.

"That's more than sizzle," he told the group.

Regarding the long-term initiative, Singlaub said: "The first step is to say we have a huge problem here. If we don't take a step now, we've lost the basin."

The BLM plans to hold public hearings on the initiative this summer.



NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063

The New York Times

MAY - 9 2000

Fire Burns Out of Control in New Mexico

By JAMES STERNGOLD

LOS ANGELES, May 8 — An effort by the National Park Service to set a controlled fire in a densely wooded area of New Mexico has blown out of control, forcing the evacuation of thousands of people and threatening the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where some of the country's most sensitive nuclear weapons research is conducted.

The Los Alamos fire started Thursday, when the park service began burning thick stands of ponderosa pines and conifers that had accumulated in the Bandelier National Monument after years of suppressing natural fires. But the efforts, for which officials had extensively planned, quickly went awry when fierce winds, gusting up to 45 miles an hour, suddenly blew the blaze beyond the fire breaks that had been prepared and blackened hundreds of acres throughout the weekend.

Kevin Roark, a spokesman for the nuclear laboratory, said the fire had reached the western edge of the laboratory site, which covers 42 square miles. He said the laboratory had been closed, with about 500 emergency personnel on duty and the other 10,000 or so employees sent home.

Mr. Roark said the fire was threatening bunkers where high explosives were stored. The bunkers, made of hardened concrete and earth, survived a fire in 1977, so the laboratory was fairly confident there would be no problems this time. He added that nuclear materials, like the plutonium used in bombs, were stored in separate sites that are not near the fire.

Steve Coburn, the fire marshal with the Los Alamos County Fire Department, said that roughly 2,000 acres had burned and that about 500 households south of the city, near Los Alamos Canyon, had been evacuated. Many more people had voluntarily

left the area. He said the city looked like a ghost town, with the air thick with heavy, dark smoke and ash swirling in the stiff winds.

Forest service officials said the fire might be contained in a few days, at best, if the winds died down.

"The conditions were in the acceptable limits when they began the burn, but the winds this time of year are very unpredictable," Mr. Coburn said. He said there had been no injuries and no homes destroyed, but the fire was within several hundred yards of a residential area.

Another fire, near the southern resort town of Ruidoso, burned 4,500 acres and forced the evacuation of more than 200 homes today, The Associated Press reported. That fire, mostly on the Lincoln National Forest, started Sunday and has destroyed a mobile home and two homes under construction. Two firefighters suffered minor injuries.

The Washington Times

Forest fire paralyzes Los Alamos lab

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. — A forest fire spread to 5,000 acres yesterday, forcing hundreds of people from their homes and virtually shutting down the Los Alamos national nuclear lab.

As the blaze burned about half a mile away, most of the explosive material at the Los Alamos National Laboratory was safely protected in nonflammable concrete and metal buildings surrounded by earthen berms, said John Gustafson, a lab spokesman.

No serious injuries were reported.

MAY - 9 2000



NEWS SUMMARY

U.S. Department of the Interior

Office of Communications

PICK-UP IN ROOM 1063

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 19, 1998

The Salt Lake Tribune

Interior Boss Warms Up to Idaho Fires

BY STEVE STUEBNER
SPECIAL TO THE
TRIBUNE

SALMON, Idaho -- Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt looked down from a helicopter Tuesday morning and saw 11 small fires slowly burning in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area, a fair bit of smoke, and thought it was a beautiful sight.

"Here, for the first time in the history of America, we can see the entire panorama of natural fire management in action," Babbitt told a clutch of reporters outside the Salmon airport following the hourlong flight. "This is the vision of how we'll be managing forests in the West, and across the nation."

Ten years after fires charred nearly half of Yellowstone National Park, Babbitt extolled the virtues of letting fires burn naturally to renew forests by weeding out sick and dying timber, avoiding huge catastrophic fires and improving wildlife habitat.

The 11 fires burning in the Frank Church wilderness in central Idaho cover an estimated 7,600 acres. They are expected to burn for the remainder of the summer until they consume about 38,000 acres, officials said.

Letting fires burn also can save money, Babbitt said.

Monitoring the naturally occurring fires costs about \$35 per acre compared with \$500 to \$1,000 per acre for full suppression.

Intensive monitoring continues throughout the day, said Kent Fuellenbach, spokesman for the Salmon-Challis National Forest. Twice-daily flights keep track of the fires, and their progress is tracked by Global Positioning System satellites. Meteorologists provide information on weather forecasts, and ground crews collect samples of twigs and branches for labs to check on moisture content.

Letting fires burn also can save lives, Babbitt said.

"This morning I saw some of the most rugged landscapes anywhere in the world," he said. "This is tough, tough country. It's really dangerous to have crews out there trying to fight fire in such steep terrain."

Even before the epic burns hit Yellowstone, the U.S. Forest Service had been allowing wildfires to burn in a number of Western wilderness areas. The practice has been going on since the mid-1970s.

In 1994, the Clinton administration forged ahead with a more aggressive natural fire policy to improve forest health. Since the policy was implemented in earnest last year, the number of natural fires in wilderness and fires set by agencies in the spring and fall on other federal lands have increased.

By the end of 1998, as many as 2 million acres of wildlands may

burn under the new policy, Interior officials said.

Kathy Jo Pollock, a spokeswoman for the Interagency Fire Center in Salt Lake City, said Utah is in the process of compiling a prescribed burn plan for Utah's federal lands.

Before a decision can be made to conduct a prescribed burn, to suppress a fire or let one burn, a prescribed burn plan needs to be in place.

Such a plan takes into consideration factors including how much dead timber is in the forest, how a burn would affect wildlife habitat and air standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

"The plans can change every year," she said. "Even a change in the weather can affect the plan."

Key congressional leaders disagree with the Clinton administration's policy, especially in regard to the use of logging and livestock grazing to reduce the potential for catastrophic fires.

Rep. Helen Chenoweth, R-Idaho, who chairs the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health, said Tuesday that large-scale timber-thinning should occur before wildfires are allowed to burn in forests.

"Logging does have a role to play in forest health," said Chad Hyslop, Chenoweth spokesman. "If we combine the best logging principles with prescribed burning, we can restore the forest faster as opposed to a massive wildfire that destroys everything. To say that fire can solve all of our problems is wrong. Babbitt suffers from tunnel vision."

Babbitt acknowledged that Congress does not unanimously support natural fires. "We need to do a lot more show and tell," he said.

One of the biggest obstacles to allowing fires to burn is the possibility of people or property being destroyed.

The Idaho fires are threatening a historic homestead on the main Salmon River, called Lantz Bar, and the Gatin Ranch, where nine homes are located in a rural subdivision, fire officials said. Fire crews have "fire-proofed" structures at both locations, including a ranch house, which has been wrapped in fire-resistant material.

If conditions turn nasty, and the wilderness fires are judged to pose an unacceptable threat, full suppression efforts will begin, Fullenbach said.

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NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Office of the Secretary
Embargoed for release: March 31, 1998

Contact: Jamie Workman or Joan Anzelmo
(202) 208-6416 (208) 387-5457

Babbitt, Firefighters Mark Overhaul of Wildland Fire *Gearing up for fifth year after tragic fire season, Interior Secretary returns to Boise*

As immortalized in Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire* fifty years ago, planeloads of elite wildland smokejumpers soar over the Rockies, step into the air, and parachute back to earth, prepared for anything, miles from the nearest road. Only now work just got more complex.

For this year, under a new federal policy, they may start as many fires as they suppress.

In a dry, *La Nina* Spring, Babbitt joins jumpers and officials at Boise's National Interagency Fire Center on Thursday, April 1, to mark the complete overhaul of wildland fire operations that are safer, healthier, less costly and destructive for firefighters, taxpayers and natural landscapes alike.

Specifically, he calls attention to federal results of: 1) dramatically increasing the number and size of prescribed fires (+172 percent), agency-by-agency, state-by-state; 2) aggressively thinning small trees in forests choked with fuel, even in Parks; 3) carefully reducing excess smoke through fuels management plans just completed with the EPA Air Quality Planning & Standards office.

"Five years ago, on this jetway, I heard very bad news. Fourteen firefighters were missing and believed dead from an extreme fire that blew up near Grand Junction, Colorado. Soon I spoke with the grieving families. They all felt what one said specifically: 'I hope that you are going to change things to make sure this doesn't happen again.' I promised we would change what we must."

Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman and Babbitt cleared the table. They questioned everything. They set out under the Federal Wildland Fire Policy and Program Review to find ways to work safer, work smarter, work closer together with states, counties, contractors and each other. They forged steady partnerships and charted a clear new scientific course in fire management. In the process, they confirmed what many on the ground had long suspected:

Fire is natural. Suppressing fire builds up fuel. That fuel load means wildland fires now burn several hundred degrees hotter, twenty-one times bigger, and spread many seconds faster, growing ever more lethal, destructive and expensive to fight. In the 1970s we spent millions each year to put out wildfires. A few years ago we spent over a billion. It was time for an overhaul.

"This season may be intense," said Babbitt. "But we cannot simply blame *La Nina* for the recurring nightmare western cities face each summer. Over this century our presence on the land - grazing, logging old growth, development of homes in fire prone zones, and, above all, fire suppression -- has triggered a sequence of changes that only worsens the crisis. To defuse fires, we had to de-fuel them; we had to integrate and internalize fire operations into annual land management decisions, and use progressive grazing, thinning, building codes and fire to restore healthy flames."

That overhaul didn't just happen on its own. It wasn't simple. It took courage and cooperation. But after hard work a new attitude -- toward fighting fire with fire -- is well under way.

1) A worried Flagstaff fire district chief last month asked the Forest Service to conduct a prescribed fire, and they did, with the desired results.

2) "Fireproofing" a forest by thinning out small dense undergrowth, as planned in Grand Canyon National Park, was controversial, but moved forward, armed with science.

3) A new EPA report: "Where there is fire, there is smoke, and smoke pollutes our air. As land managers increase prescribed burning on our nation's wildland, areas affected by the smoke must still meet the federal air quality standards. Federal, State, Tribal land and air quality managers are working in partnership to reconcile these seemingly contrasting goals: healthier wildland ecosystems through the increased use of prescribed fire and cleaner air(www.epa.gov/airlinks/)."

Is it working? Consider these numbers:

Before 1994, USFS managers in Montana burned less than 10,000 acres a year. In 1999, they will burn 75,000 acres, and by 2001 more than 100,000 acres.

Or consider how last year, firefighters fought wildfires that burned 12,000 acres of BLM land in Montana. Next year, fire managers plan to set fire to treat 14,000 BLM acres in Montana.

Collectively, the five federal wildland firefighting agencies plan to treat 2.3 million acres, nearly a threefold or 172 percent increase over the 10-year average.

One graphic measure of progress is that Boise's crew of 66 Smokejumpers now market themselves to fire managers in all agencies to help start fires, to reduce dangerous and dense fuels. Smokejumpers once furloughed for the winter stayed on to complete these projects.

This spring they plan to assist with 20 separate projects in seven western states, ranging from prescribed burns to mechanical treatments and prepping areas for hazardous fuels reductions with BLM, NPS, BIA, USFWS and the USFS. "We know what the forests need, and why, and how to get there. We take a project from start to finish, allowing managers to concentrate valuable time on other assignments," said Sean Cross, Boise Smokejumper Manager.

Nor is this merely a western development. In the Southern US Region, 10,000 unwanted wildfires have been controlled after burning just 117,000 acres, while 700 restorative, prescribed burns have treated 544,000 acres.

Beyond healthier landscapes and safer firefighters: taxpayers benefit. Conducting prescribed fires typically costs about \$30 per acres, but can range from \$5 to \$70 depending on the size of the fire, the type of material burned, and the proximity to buildings. In contrast, suppressing wildland fires costs about \$700 per acre, but can range from \$500 to \$1,600 per acre depending on severity.

Who: Interior Secretary Babbitt, NIFC officials, Boise Smokejumpers

What: "Fulfilling the Promise" event to mark overhaul of fire policy.

When: 10 a.m., Thursday, April 1, 1999

Where: National Interagency Fire Center, by Airport, Smokejumper Loft, Boise

How: Briefings, remarks, state by state and agency breakdowns of changes, impact

Why: Healthier landscapes, safer firefighting, savings for taxpayers

Approximate fire use in five federal agencies (as of September 30, 1998). Prior to 1998 the figures include prescribed fire and "prescribed natural fire." Beginning in 1998, the figures include prescribed fire and "wildland fire use."

Agency	1997 Actual	1998 Projected	10-Year Average	1999 Goal
USDA Forest Service	1,097,658	1,249,170	461,602	1,470,000
Bureau of Indian Affairs	36,768	85,000	51,155	100,500
Bureau of Land Management	62,680	150,000	56,314	220,000
National Park Service	70,000	102,000	50,000	110,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	322,093	500,000	5-yr ave 224,575	400,000
Total	1,589,199	1,886,170	843,646	2,300,500

1999 - 10-Year Average Comparison

Agency	1999 Goal	10-Year Average	% Increase 1999 - 10 Yr. Avg.
USDA Forest Service	1,470,000	461,602	218%
Bureau of Indian Affairs	100,500	51,155	96%
Bureau of Land Management	220,000	56,314	291%
National Park Service	110,000	50,000	120%
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	400,000	5-yr ave 224,575	78%
Total	2,300,500	843,646	172%



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Office of the Secretary
For Release: March 5, 1998

Contact: John Wright
202/208-6416

TLC Documentary Highlights Training of U.S. Smoke Jumpers

U.S. Smoke Jumpers are highly skilled wildland firefighters that use parachutes for transportation into remote areas to provide initial response to wildland fires

The Learning Channel network will televise a documentary episode entitled "Smoke Jumpers Boot Camp" which will focus on the training and preparation of a 23-person team conducting training exercises. The segment is scheduled to air Saturday, March 7, from 8-9 p.m. and again at 11- midnight (EST).

The Smoke Jumpers are an elite group of interagency specialists from the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture that are considered the most highly skilled wildland firefighters in the nation. They use parachutes as transportation into remote areas in to order to provide initial attack on wildland fires.

Alexandria Productions, Inc. in cooperation with The Learning Channel Adventure Series, followed smoke jumpers throughout their training sessions at a base in Oregon to demonstrate their physical and mental fitness, and the well-disciplined teamwork required of this elite firefighting force. The segment takes the viewer through the grueling hardship and intensity of the training and tell the personal stories of the smoke jumpers from their first jump and fire training in forested areas.

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NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

BABBITT TO USE FLAMETHROWER, HIGH TECH, TO 'FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE' *Prescribed burn at refuge helps build national computer model to predict fire behavior*

Office of the Secretary
For release: February 18, 1998

Contact: Dorn Whitmore/Jamie Workman
(407) 861-0667

From the bed of a moving pickup, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt will use a terra-torch to ignite a prescribed fire at 11 a.m. on Thursday Feb. 19 at Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

But this 800 acre burn isn't just any high intensity prescribed fire. It will simulate conditions generated by wildfires, while a national team of scientists -- sponsored by Los Alamos National Laboratory, the National Weather Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Air Force and the Kennedy Space Center -- studies and measures fire behavior and impact.

The results will help build and focus a national computer model that can predict actual fire behavior under given weather, terrain, and habitat conditions. That model, in turn, will help cities and states as well as fire professionals plan safer, cheaper, and more accurate management of fire, fuels and private property throughout the country, especially in the West.

"This is a classic swords into plowshares story," said Babbitt. "We are drawing on tools and expertise developed during the Cold War and using them in the careful and scientific defense of America's precious natural heritage. These models help our campaign to fight fire with fire."

Babbitt, who worked on the fire lines during parts of the past three summers, reaffirmed that when fire threatens lives and property it must be put out. But he demonstrated how fire is essential to the vigor of the landscape, how always excluding it everywhere has proven risky and costly, and how the Administration would use fire and other tools to restore health and safety to forests and rangelands.

"For over a decade, wildland fires have burned hotter, bigger and faster, growing more lethal, destructive and expensive to fight," said Babbitt. "A century of snuffing all small and regular fires has clogged our forested wildlands with dense, dying and exotic fuels. Once ignited, flames now result in an intense, unpredictable inferno, killing life down to the roots, leading to mud slides and floods, and loss of game and wildlife habitat."

In one typical forest, fire before 1986 burned an average 3,000 acres each year. Since then fire has averaged 63,000 acres, a 21-fold increase. Decades ago, taxpayers spent \$100 million to fight fires in the U.S.; today we spend \$1 billion. By contrast, raging wildfires stop in their tracks when they hit a landscape that had been thinned and treated with prescribed fire.

Babbitt plans to make those exceptions the national rule, saving money and lives. Under this drive, the Clinton Administration is investing \$40-50 million to double the acreage of fuels reduction through prescribed fire, treating 1-2 million acres by 1998.



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Immediate Release: May 9, 1996

For text, Contact: Jamie Workman
(202) 208-6416

BABBITT TO FORESTERS: UNITE STAKEHOLDERS TO INVEST IN FIRE
Advocates careful fire use to boost wildland health, productivity.

Fresh from his experience out on the fire lines of Arizona, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today gave an address to the 20th Tall Timbers Fire Ecology Conference in Boise, ID.

He spoke to unite ranchers, loggers, conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts, arguing that investing with care in prescribed wildland fire will yield rangelands and forests that are healthier, safer and more productive over the long term.

"Nine decades of strenuous fire suppression have reduced the natural diversity and vitality of our plants and wildlife," said Babbitt. "Too many trees must compete for scarce nutrients and water, causing serious problems of forest health."

"Recent national polls, practices, and the Yellowstone experience all confirm that America supports the role of fire in growth, stability and renewal," said Babbitt. "But the consensus for prescribed fire is much harder to obtain on multiple use lands in the West, where competing stakeholders may often distrust each other."

In order to forge a consensus behind prescribed wildland fire, Babbitt argues for:

- Using the Bureau of Land Management's newly created Resource Advisory Councils to build federal-state-private coalitions at the local level, finding where all parties can agree on how, where, when and why to prescribe fire.
- Reinvesting a larger share of the proceeds from public lands to maintain the health and productivity of those resources.

"To reform fire policy, history provides us with a good consensus-building precedent," said Babbitt. "For back in 1911, after scientists, stakeholders and the public all united to suppress fire, that Congress provided the funds and legal mechanism to create the premier firefighting system in the world. Now, as the national paradigm continues to shift toward prescribed fire, this Congress should respond in kind."

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NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Release February 14, 1996

Contact: Bob Johns 202-452-5127

Judy Kissinger 202-205-1904

CABINET SECRETARIES ENDORSE INTEGRATED WILDLAND FIRE POLICY

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman today endorsed a joint federal wildland fire policy that will provide greater uniformity, help streamline and improve interagency coordination and communication, and reduce risks to both people and resources.

After the 1994 fire season, the Secretaries chartered a comprehensive, year-long study to give form, substance, direction and priority to the ideas and lessons learned by wildland fire managers over the past two decades.

Their 45-page report is a landmark document, turning what managers have learned in the field over the years into a cohesive, uniform federal policy. That policy directs managers to:

• Integrate wildland fire into land and resource management plans to protect, maintain, and enhance natural resources;

• Base fire management activities, including suppression action, on the values to be protected, cost, and land and resource management objectives;

• Articulate the roles and responsibilities of federal agencies in wildland/urban interface (where inhabited areas mix with undeveloped wildland);

• Ensure that federal policies are uniform and programs are implemented cooperatively and cohesively.

Although it will go into effect gradually, over a period of months, the Secretaries have already directed their land managers to assume the responsibility for the implementation of the principles, policies and recommendations of the Report.

"For years we splintered fire -- as good, bad, natural, prescribed, state, private and federal -- and each agency had a different response for each one. But wildland fire respects no boundaries or categories, and neither can we. Our new federal policy shows all land managers from every agency how to prepare for, respond to, and use wildland fire through one standard approach," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, who fought fires as a youth during the summer of 1994.

(MORE)

News releases may be downloaded from the DOI Homepage at URL <http://www.mgs.gov/doi/>

Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman also gave the Report a top priority. "This interagency policy will encourage Federal Land Managers to exercise their full range of options in dealing with wildland fire, from allowing fire to function in its natural role to prompt suppression. While wildland fire can be a destructive force, it is also a vital part of nature that can be managed for positive purposes."

The report reinforces the commitment of the two Departments to personnel safety and management accountability. Protection of life remains the first priority. The second protection priority is property or natural and cultural resources, depending on the values to be protected.

The report also addresses one of the more complex fire management issues facing federal agencies: fire in the interface between wildlands and inhabited areas. The report spells out a clear operational role for the federal agencies as a partner in the wildland/urban interface to fight wildland fires, to reduce accumulations of flammable vegetation, to provide technical assistance to state and local governments, and to participate in cooperative education.

The new policy, contained in a report titled "Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review," was prepared by the Agriculture Department's Forest Service and the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and National Biological Service. Other agencies participating in the development and implementation of this policy include the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Weather Service.

Copies of the full Report may be obtained from the Office of External Affairs, National Interagency Fire Center, 3833 S. Development Ave., Boise, Idaho 83705-5354, or by calling 208-387-5150 or 208-387-5457. The report is also available on the Internet at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/land/wdfire.htm>

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