



WESTERN WILDFIRE POSITION PAPER

Camp '70

Photo: Greenville, CA following the 2021 Dixie Fire

ABSTRACT

A position paper, including eight recommendations to address the western wildfire problem. This paper was written by graduate foresters of the University of California, who attended the 1970 U.C. Forestry Camp at Meadow Valley, California. The paper addresses the causes of the problem, vegetation density, forest management, infrastructure, wildland urban interface (WUI), and funding.

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Camp'70 Western Wildfire Position Paper

Executive Summary

The Camp '70 team, a group of primarily retired professional foresters, attended and graduated with B.S. in Forestry degrees from the University of California School of Forestry in 1972.¹ Some have advanced degrees, including at least one Ph.D. We all attended U.C. Forestry Camp at Meadow Valley, near Quincy, California, during 1970. The team members have various careers in forestry, including government, private industry, urban forestry, teaching, and consulting. Many of the members residing in California hold or have held Registered Professional Forester (RPF) licenses. Our team of former classmates presents the following eight recommendations to combat the western wildfire problem:

1. Reduce wildland vegetation density throughout the forestlands of the Western U.S.
2. The regulatory morass that has handcuffed active forest management on both private and public lands over the last forty years has been a primary cause of uncontrolled forest growth and must be streamlined.
3. Billions of dollars of “new money” must be provided each year instead of reallocating or transferring money between accounts in annual federal and state budgets.
4. Camp '70 recommends incentives including supply certainty, grants, tax, and other incentives be provided to stimulate a much larger and more competitive forest products industry and its infrastructure.
5. Current air quality burning restrictions need to be modified to facilitate prescribed fire in forested watersheds during appropriate burning conditions.
6. Relax export barriers on timber harvested from National Forests .
7. Allocate “new money” for wildland-urban interface (WUI) fire safety.
8. The federal government, tribal, state, and local governments are stakeholders and must work together to implement these recommendations.

¹ A few of the Camp '70 group graduated in 1973

Camp '70 realized early on that the western wildfire problem is complex. We discussed many issues, alternatives, and potential solutions and decided to concentrate on what we felt were the most important ones. Our group members of mostly retired foresters do not receive compensation from any public or private entity for the positions taken in this paper. Our recommendations and comments are straightforward. Camp '70 commentaries are designed to educate the public and representatives on what must be done to remedy the problem without dancing around the issues of red tape, over-regulation, and practices that some might find objectionable. Fire season is almost here. Now is the time for action by well-informed, experienced foresters and other professional wildland managers.

Introduction

Camp '70 foresters were typically idealistic, largely long-haired young men and women, questioning the status quo and looking for social and environmental change. We all entered forestry during a period of social unrest and engaged in social and ecological debates, as did many who attended the University of California at Berkeley in the 1970s. The love of forests lured each of us to Meadow Valley and Mulford Hall in 1970 to pursue careers that would contribute to the health of our forests through sound, scientific management practices. Following a science-loaded pre-forestry program, we trained in forest ecology, silviculture, entomology, forest management, fire management, recreation management, and economics, among other courses. We have all changed over these many years. Still, one thing remains constant – our love for our forests. That continuing feeling brought us together again more than fifty years later because we were concerned over the mega-wildfire destruction of our Western forests.

The Camp '70 team came together during the historic Dixie and Caldor fires in northern California. The group was united by a desire to solve the western wildfire situation. We relied heavily on our own experiences of working, observing, studying, researching, and “tromping” through many western forests.

Camp '70 agreed that much of the wildfire problem has developed over the last forty years. Reduced emphasis on prescribed fire, thinning, logging, and other forest management activities in a climate of environmental regulation and red tape have allowed western forests and parks to produce an epidemic of trees.

The situation has worsened because of warming trends and drought that have dried out our National Forests, Parks, and private holdings². Forests are choked with ladder fuels - smaller trees that provide avenues for fire to reach the crowns of large, often overcrowded trees. Unprecedented high winds have driven fires into and up the fuel ladders into tree crowns, creating virtually unstoppable mega-fires. The recent August (1,000,000 acres), North Complex (319,000 acres), Castle (130,000 acres), Dixie (963,000 acres), and Caldor (219,000 acres) fires are good examples. The 2018 Camp Fire (153,000 acres) destroyed over 18,000 structures and killed 85 people.

These vast fires are not limited to the Sierra and the eastern Cascades. The coastal redwood forests, State Parks, and the wildland-urban interface (WUI) communities of the Bay Area, Marin, and Sonoma Counties have been devastated by wildfire. Southern California has also been hit hard by catastrophic fires. The usually fire-resistant giant sequoias of the southern Sierra have recently suffered devastation. Contemporary fires in other states demonstrate that

² These conditions are factors in what has been referred to as Climate Change.

mega-wildfires are not just a California problem but a significant challenge affecting all western states. The following table lists a few of the largest fires in other western states in recent years³:

Year	State	Fire Name	Acres Burned (rounded)
2014	Washington	Carlton Complex	256,000
2015	Washington	Okanagon Complex	305,000
2017	Montana	Montana Complex	270,000
2021	Oregon	Bootleg Fire	413,000
2021	Oregon	Beechie Creek	194,000
2020	Wyoming	Mullen Fire	177,000
2020	Colorado	Cameron Peak Fire	209,000

Catastrophic wildfires are now expected each year. Fire season will be upon us before we know it. It is now early 2022. We ask, “When and where will the next mega-fire hit?”

Camp ’70 supports the recommendations of the *Venado Declaration*. However, we believe the Declaration falls short of including a primary cause of our current wildfire crisis-- an over-burdensome regulatory process that has handcuffed active forest management for the last forty years. We recognize that it is easy to list and discuss recommendations on paper. Formulating solutions is straightforward. Implementation is the hard part.

We are in a period where cooperation among competing interests is necessary to have forests as we have known them in the West. Both environmental and fundamental political, often polarizing differences, must be set aside to recognize the importance of our forests and the need to address the western wildfire problem. There must be more give and take. That being said, some ideas regarding forest management have been proven by the recent megafires to simply not work. We cannot hide our heads in the sand and consider all ideas equal. Aggressive forest management to deal with the incredible increase in wildfire fuels over the last 40 years is necessary, not an opinion. Our society can no longer afford the luxury of meeting bad ideas halfway if we are to realistically and effectively deal with out-of-control forest growth. Therefore, a primary goal of our group is to stand for the truth regarding forest management. We want to move the debate. Over the last forty years, western public forest land management has clearly not worked. Our public forests are being destroyed, not preserved.

Camp ’70 believes that the majority of the public supports wise management of our watersheds/forests to keep them green. Prudent management includes taking actions designed to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires that can destroy hundreds of thousands of acres and more in a single fire event. Our forests have been growing themselves to death for decades and are ripe for catastrophic fire. Unnaturally dense stands of overstocked green trees and fire-killed trees now dominate entire landscapes the length of the Sierra Nevada and vast parts of California’s coast ranges and other western states. Hundreds of millions of tons of wildfire fuels need to be cleaned up to prevent continued catastrophic losses and re-burns. This job is immense, and most of it cannot be accomplished with hand labor. Our forests demand huge

³ Fires shown are some that are over 100,000 acres. There have been many more large fires in these states.

commitments of money and mechanical thinning. Camp'70 believes the vast majority of the public wants to see healthy, green conifer forests rather than brush-covered hillsides.

Advocates for letting the forests alone to reestablish naturally and address the wildfire issue by concentrating on fireproofing homes ignore the reality that homeowners in the WUI want forests, as well as a home saved from wildfire. Folks want to enjoy a walk in a forest and the scent of fir and pine on both a clear or rainy day. The air permeating a healthy, green forest is much healthier than the overwhelming odor and toxicity of wildfire smoke that now invades even our large urban areas, hundreds and even thousands of miles away from the mega-fires.

Camp '70 knows that fire as a management tool can be risky. Prescribed fire, well managed and strategically used over broad landscapes, is an essential tool forest stewards must be able to employ, often following thinning removals to reduce forest fuels. Managed wildfires are also a management option. However, these managed fires can be very risky and should be conducted only when fuel moisture, weather, fuel loads, availability of fire fighting resources, and proximity to WUI communities permit. Wildland professional forest stewards, together with the input of fire professionals, must make managed wildfire decisions on a case-by-case basis rather than as a matter of blanket policy.

After five months of bi-weekly discussion, Camp'70 presents the following eight recommendations and commentary for addressing the western wildfire situation.

Camp '70 Recommendations

1. Reduce wildland vegetation density throughout the forestlands of the Western U.S.

The fuel load reduction goal should be to treat every acre on all federal, state, and private forest lands having unnaturally high levels of trees and surface fuel.⁴ Forest growth is measurable. An annual (or biannual) public accounting of that growth on public land needs to be mandatory and presented in front of every County Board of Supervisors throughout the state. Actual forest removal quantities should also be measured, accounted for, and reported. Ultimately forest growth (including all sources of burnable cellulose, measured in tons/acre/year) on public lands has to be offset with exact quantities of forest removals (through timber harvest, forest thinning, biomass removal, prescribed fire, firewood permits, etc.). Growth and reductions must be better balanced to protect our forests from catastrophic fires. The mega-fires have taught us that to do otherwise, i.e., allow forest growth to accumulate and burn again, is not an acceptable management option.

Addressing every unnaturally overstocked acre is a goal that will take many years to achieve. Therefore, forest stewards must prioritize treatment areas. Prioritization can include fuel-load treatment by ecological, recreational, historical, and community importance. We understand that fuel reduction treatments will vary by forest, watershed, the variety of topographic landscapes, and consideration of community input. Experienced, professional forest stewards, very familiar with the forests they are responsible for protecting, should decide the vegetation treatments to employ. These decisions must include fire suppression, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and water quality considerations.

Pre-commercial and commercial mechanical thinning should be employed to open stand crowns far enough to resist catastrophic fire. This spacing will vary by stand density and tree sizes and will reduce the risk of crown fires that are hard to control. We recommend the removal of fuel ladders and excess ground fuels in and around WUI, along roads, ridges and powerlines. Where practicable, fuels on steeper slopes should be removed. Removal of dead trees is a priority. Those trees should be felled, removed, and utilized if possible to reduce the costs of these activities.⁵ Some snags should remain for wildlife habitat.

⁴ This requires some qualification. For example, lodgepole pine stands are typically very dense. Thinning in these stands will result in windthrow that will cause residual downed dead trees. Thinning in red fir (*abies magnifica*) stands can also be problematic.

⁵ Camp '70 understands that thinning alone won't stop high wind driven fires like we experienced in 2021. Our recommendations are designed to reduce size and intensity of wild fire so that the fire can be directly attacked on the ground.

Wildlife biologists and fire specialists should provide input on the number of snags left on treated areas to ensure sufficient numbers to protect wildlife habitat.

The un-merchantable green thinnings and woody debris must be removed and used in biomass facilities or piled and burned before applying prescribed fire to the thinned areas⁶. Prescribed fire should follow mechanical thinning as often as possible⁷.

2. The regulatory morass that has handcuffed active forest management on both private and public lands over the last 40 years has been a primary cause of uncontrolled forest growth and must be streamlined.

Every member of Camp '70 loves the forest and believes in environmental protection. However, we recognize that a once well-intentioned regulatory process meant to protect the forests of the West has produced the exact opposite. Instead of being the solution for environmental problems, over-burdensome and restrictive forest regulations have become the cause of out-of-control forest growth and crowding resulting in drought weakened, insect and disease killed trees. In short, over-regulation and red tape hinder forest management and the ability to make and implement swift decisions. The federal and state governments must streamline the environmental review process to promote and facilitate the removal of the vast quantities of forest growth requiring treatment. Removals from the forest must include all categories of forest vegetation (brush, trees, snags, and down woody debris) regardless of size to make residual stands resilient to catastrophic fire.

3. Billions of dollars of “new money” must be provided each year instead of reallocating or transferring money between accounts in annual federal and state budgets.

Much of the USFS budget has been weighted heavily for fire suppression. Forest management activities have been underfunded. The Camp '70 group believes this funding must change to aggressively attack the western wildfire problem. The group discussed the following possible funding alternatives:

First, Congress can increase new funding for more forest management and fuels reduction. These activities go hand-in-hand. However, funding can be a political problem, resulting in uncertain or inconsistent monetary support, depending on the make-up of the Congress and Presidency.

⁶ Camp '70 knows that there are very few biomass plants. More of these facilities must be built to utilize waste materials from our forests. We believe joint ventures between federal, State, and counties to re-open and build and operate biomass facilities should be aggressively explored. Piling and burning might require a relaxing of some of our air quality standards.

⁷ This kind of prescribed fire application is often called underburning.

Second, all revenues generated from timber, salvage, thinning sales, ski area, and other federal land leases should go back to the various federal agencies for vegetation management activities and programs that address the wildfire problem. Money for local advisory groups and special vegetation management projects would also come from these revenues to ensure guaranteed annual funding. The funds should not be placed in the General Funds.

Third, western forests are watersheds that provide water to water districts, power companies, urban and rural communities, and farms. These entities can share the cost of forest management activities that benefit the states, their residents, utilities, and businesses.

We recommend that federal and state agencies explore these and other alternatives for forest management funding on our federal and state lands.

4. Camp '70 recommends incentives including supply certainty, grants, tax, and other incentives be provided to stimulate a much larger and more competitive forest products industry.

The forest products industry's capacities to handle the vast quantities of removals from our forest are severely deficient. The West lost an enormous share of its wood processing facilities over the last 30-40 years. More mills and power facilities, new technologies, and uses for traditionally unmerchantable trees are required. The states and the federal government can provide tax and other financial incentives to entrepreneurs to invest in wood processing and biomass facilities, including grant monies to independent entities to help establish new facilities. None of this can occur without **long-term raw product supply guarantees**. In addition, the permitting process for new facility construction must be streamlined at the state and county levels to remove roadblocks for new start-ups

Forest residues should be recognized as waste products with little or no market value after factoring in transportation costs. The value is in the hazard reduction, not in the product. The objective is to remove the hazard as quickly as possible. Hazard reduction will require subsidies in most cases.

Forest biomass-generated electricity is an integral part of the industrial base required to protect our forests. Start-ups of mothballed biomass facilities and the construction of new plants will need state and federal regulatory incentives.

5. Current air quality burning restrictions need to be modified to facilitate prescribed fire in forested watersheds during appropriate burning conditions.

The current system often prevents prescribed fire during the safest burning conditions and needs to be revised to accommodate forest management and allow effective wood products facility operations.

6. Relax export barriers on timber harvested from national forest lands.

Mills are saturated with burned logs. Federal timber export will allow export markets to relieve mills of some of their overcapacity problems. We can save taxpayers' money by relaxing export restrictions to sell products without domestic demand overseas. Federal agencies should use their authority and request expanded authorization to develop markets for excess forest material that contribute to wildfire hazard.

7. Allocate "new money" for wildland urban interface (WUI) fire safety.

Wildland forest stewards (managers) care about forests, watersheds, wildlife, and the communities they serve, whether they work for private companies, the state, or the federal government. The residents of WUI areas are drawn to their communities because they love living within or near a forest, its lakes, rivers, and streams.

Camp '70 believes people living within the WUI are not only interested in protecting their homes from wildfire. They want to see the forest around them protected. Forests are sacred places for many Native Americans and others and provide livelihoods for residents of the WUI.

Most residents of the West love to visit forests and parks as a source of recreation and the wanderlust feeling of the wilderness experience. Hunting and fishing in a forest environment draw others to our forest lands. Most folks who live and work within a forest environment wouldn't trade that life for an urban job. They want to see our forests preserved and protected from catastrophic wildfire. They also want to enjoy all of the benefits forests provide, including economic, recreational, health, cultural, and aesthetic benefits.

Homes, communities, and subdivisions need to be protected through incentives and active forest fuels reduction. Greenville burned because the long-term lack of fuels management on adjacent Forest Service lands had turned the Dixie Fire into a mega-fire, not because the community was built in the wrong place. A community embedded in a forested landscape is not a problem. It is an opportunity. With a revitalized infrastructure, a localized workforce will have to live somewhere ("Back to Greenville!").

Preservation of the WUI should be a joint venture of state, federal, and local governments. The state or counties should assess local fire safety conditions with the input of local citizens. Authorities should assist homeowners in improving their homes' fire resistance and defensible space. Local government, homeowners' associations (HOAs), and homeowners need to take responsibility for mitigating the situation, including access/egress, defensible

space, and structure hardening. Local fire departments (with funding help) could assume a vital mitigation role.

8. The different levels of government created the western wildfire problem through haphazard management, planning, and regulation over many decades. The federal government, tribal, state, and local governments are stakeholders and must work together to implement these recommendations.

The federal government has the financial resources and expertise to implement the solutions to the western wildfire issue.

The western states provide needed fire suppression resources, plus expertise in managing wildlands to restore landscapes. The states also have the authority under the Clean Air Act to modify regulations restricting the use of prescribed fire.

The counties are responsible for guiding private landowners in reducing the fire hazards within their jurisdiction. The counties have done an excellent job in flood management, and we need to apply the same will in wildland fire management at the county level.

The wildfire solution will require all levels of government working together.

Conclusion

Camp '70 realized early on that the western wildfire problem is complex. We discussed many issues, alternatives, and potential solutions and decided to concentrate on what we felt were the most important ones. Our group members of mostly retired foresters do not receive compensation from any public or private entity for the positions taken in this paper. Our recommendations and comments are straightforward. Camp '70 commentaries are designed to educate the public and representatives on what must be done to remedy the problem without dancing around the issues of red tape, over-regulation, and practices that some might find objectionable. Fire season is almost here. Now is the time for action by well-informed, experienced, professional wildland managers, including foresters, and fire professionals, aided by additional new funding and reduction of the well-intentioned but burdensome constraints of over-regulation and bureaucratic red tape.