

## Montana's Rocky Mountain Front: Fire, Wilderness, and Safe Communities September 2008

**Summary: Would the risk of uncontrolled fire be greater in wilderness?** No. The Wilderness Act allows for flexibility – including motorized equipment and roads – to deal with catastrophic wildfires and the Forest Service does fight fires in Wilderness Areas when it believes that lack of action may threaten communities. The Lewis and Clark NF recently completed a map that shows of the 105 lightning caused fires between 1981-2007, 91 of them were suppressed within 3 days. Many of those fires ignited within Wilderness and the FS successfully suppressed them. You can find a link of the map at [www.savethefront.org](http://www.savethefront.org).

**What's Forest Service Policy on Fires?** Across the country, the Forest Service suppresses 98 percent of all fires whether they start in Wilderness or in non-Wilderness lands. This percentage of suppressed fires is the national average for the past five years and the Forest Service has said it will continue to suppress.

**What's Ahead for Montana's fire season?** Fires have always been a part of Montana forests, and the combination of climate change, drought, less snowpack, past forest management practices, increasing temperatures, and ever expanding population means fires will impact our region more in the future rather than less. Experts believe that fire season is now 70 days longer than in the past.

**What Are Forest Service Priorities for Fire Work?** Because of safety and budget issues, the Forest Service's highest priority is work in and around communities, near watersheds, and along access roads like Elk Creek, Beaver-Willow and Benchmark. Forest Service research, much of it done in Montana, shows that work in and around homes does the most to protect structures, provides the biggest 'bang for the buck,' and increases public and firefighter safety.

**What is Beneficial Fire Use?** Private, state, and federal scientists in Montana and the Northern Rockies have learned that forests will be healthier, firefighters safer, and rural communities better protected if some fires, when and where appropriate, are managed for beneficial use.

**Can This Help Local Communities and Landowners?** Yes, in several important ways. First, this policy allows the Forest Service and other agencies to focus more money and manpower on helping landowners prepare. Second, it allows firefighters to focus on the fires that pose the greatest risk to communities. Third, it makes for healthier forests in the long run. Montana forests evolved with fire, and by allowing lower intensity fires to burn away underbrush and dead trees that easily ignite, the Forest Service can protect an area from larger, catastrophic fires for decades to come – reducing the risk to private property, recreation areas, and lives.

**What Exactly is the Policy for Fires in Wilderness?** Section 4(d)(1) of the Act states that "such measures may be taken as necessary in the control of fires, insects and diseases" within wilderness. Since then, Congress has clarified that actions to address fire, insect outbreaks, and disease in wilderness areas including, "the use of motorized equipment, the building of fire roads, fire towers, fire breaks, or fire pre-suppression facilities where necessary and other techniques for fire control. In short, anything necessary for the protection of public health and safety is clearly permissible."

*For more information, see [www.savethefront.org](http://www.savethefront.org) or call Gabe Furshong at 406-466-2600.*