PRINCIPLES FOR FIRE MANAGEMENT WITHIN WILDERNESS AREAS OF THE CALIFORNIA DESERT

I. INTRODUCTION

The Wilderness Act designates that certain Federal lands be administered to preserve their "natural condition" and to retain their wilderness character. Wilderness is an area of land that is to remain untrammeled, primarily affected by the forces of nature. Fire is one of those natural forces.

The Wilderness Act prohibits roads, motor vehicle use, motorized equipment, landing of aircraft, mechanical transport, structures and installations. The Act provides, however, that the administering agency may allow such uses if the uses are the minimum requirement for the administration of the area for the purpose of the Wilderness Act. Such measures include actions required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area.

Further, the Wilderness Act at section 4(d)(1) provides that the administering agency may take such measures "...as may be necessary in the control of fire...subject to such conditions as the Secretary may prescribe." The California Desert Protection Act contains no special provisions regarding fire management.

Naturally ignited fires are a powerful force of nature and are integral to the wilderness condition that the agencies are required to protect. Fires, no matter what the source of ignition, may also threaten life, property, safety or unique natural or cultural resource values (e.g. endangered species, historic structures), and thus, require suppression. This Annex sets forth governing principles and prescribes measures intended to reconcile these two aspects of fire management.

II. PRINCIPLES

1. Until fire management plans with prescriptions for prescribed fire are developed, Department of the Interior deems all fires in wilderness to be "wildfires" and will be subject to suppression action.

2. A wildfire in a wilderness may not become an emergency that requires aggressive response unless the fire threatens human life, property, safety or critical resource values.

3. When engaged in suppressing wildfires in wilderness, the following "special suppression requirements" will be incorporated into the fire suppression action:

   a. Safety of fire-fighting personnel and other visitors in the wilderness area will receive the highest priority;

   b. All suppression actions will be carried out in a manner that least impairs wilderness values, i.e. minimum impact suppression techniques;

   c. Any action necessary to prevent loss of life or significant real property may be taken, even if the action impairs wilderness values (as defined in Section 2(c) of the 1964 Wilderness Act). Actions to prevent loss of property or natural or cultural resources may be taken if the action impairs wilderness values, based on the values at risk commensurate with fire management costs and personal safety;

   d. All fires in wilderness that are protected by a non-Interior agency, to the extent possible, will have an Interior Department Agency Representative assigned to the fire to advise the protecting agency of Interior Department laws and policies, including the Wilderness Act;

   e. Heavy equipment (bulldozers/tractors) will not be used in wilderness areas, except to prevent loss of human life and where judged essential to prevent loss of significant real property and natural or cultural resources, and where specifically authorized by the Agency

Administrator (Manager - Desert District Manager, Park Superintendent or Refuge Manager);

f. All rubber-tired suppression vehicles will be limited to existing residual ways of passage;

g. Engines and portable pumps may be used to support fireline construction through hose lays, where possible;

h. Field decisions regarding will genuinely consider the use of foam, fire-line explosives, fugitive (uncolored) retardant, biodegradable materials and other new technologies in lieu of more surface-disturbing suppression tactics;

i. Every effort will be made to avoid dropping retardant within 200' from any wetland or riparian area;

j. Where feasible, it will be acceptable to burn out ridges, washes, other natural barriers, and routes to stop the spread of fire and serve as control lines. Firelines may tie into but not proceed through meadows, spring areas, riparian zones or cultural sites;

k. Helicopters and retardant aircraft may be used in initial attack and as reinforcement as deemed necessary by the Incident Commander. Helicopters may land on existing heliports, helispots, or unimproved sites in wilderness;

l. Entry into wilderness should be by walking, helicopters on unimproved helispots, rappeling or smokejumping to the greatest extent practicable;

m. Chainsaw use may be pre-approved if necessary to prevent the fire from escaping initial attack or for helispot med-evac purposes;

n. Reclamation requirements will be determined by the Incident Commander and the Agency Representative. Reclamation will be determined during suppression activities while fire forces and

equipment are still on incident. Reclamation actions should be taken immediately following control of the fire. Surface disturbances occurring in wilderness from suppression actions must be rehabilitated to as natural condition as possible;

4. District Managers, Park Superintendents or Refuge Managers will issue written instructions, consistent with delegations of authority, for initial attack prior to the 1996 fire season.

5. In the absence of a fire management plan, an Escaped Fire Situation Analysis (EFSA) must be developed for every wildfire in wilderness that is not immediately suppressed. The EFSA will prescribe the level of suppression action. For fires in National Park System units, the EFSA will address appropriate suppression strategy (confine, contain or control). The EFSA may prescribe actions that range from surveillance/monitoring to full suppression. The EFSA will be used to reconcile resource management issues as they relate to the wildfire.

6. The Agency Administrator or their delegated representative is responsible for developing the EFSA in conjunction with the Incident Commander (IC).

7. Fire management plans for the California Desert will be developed and will recognize the integral role of fire as a critical natural process in wilderness. Each fire management plan will develop prescriptions under which fires, naturally or management ignited, will be permitted to burn in wilderness. Such plans must address historic fire occurrence, natural role of fire, current vegetative conditions and zones where prescribed natural fire may exist, as well as critical resources (see #2) and real property in the area.

8. Fire management plans may provide for prescribed fires to attain the following objectives:

   a. To reintroduce or maintain natural conditions of fire-dependent wildland ecosystems;

   b. To restore fire where past strict fire control measures have interfered with natural processes;

c. Where a primary value of a wilderness area will be perpetuated as a result of burning;

d. Where prescribed burning will perpetuate a threatened or endangered species, or habitat listed as critical to that species; or

e. Where necessary to return fuels to a manageable state that will allow safe, cost-effective prescribed natural fires.

9. Fire management and suppression will conform to the fire management plan that is in force for the lands in question.

10. Fire management plans will undergo consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, and all other relevant compliance of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

11. The signatories will develop local operating plans, where necessary, with other agencies, notably the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, that engage in fire suppression on Federal lands that are wilderness. Such operating plans will ensure that the laws and standards that govern wilderness on Federal lands apply to the cooperating agencies. Such operating plans will include detailed requirements for rehabilitation of suppression-caused damage.

12. The signatories will support standardized job performance requirements and qualifications for agency representatives and environmental specialists between agencies.

SIGNATURES

Molly S. Brady — 7/17/96

Manager, California Desert District — DATE

Manager, Yuma District — DATE

7/17/96

Superintendent, Mojave National Preserve — DATE

7/17/96

Superintendent, Death Valley National Park — DATE

7/17/96

Superintendent, Joshua Tree National Park — DATE

7/17/96

Superintendent, Lake Mead National Rec. Area — DATE

7/17/96

for State Supervisor, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Region One — DATE

Lower Colorado River Complex Manager, USF&WS Region Two — DATE

Area Manager, Ridgecrest Resource Area — DATE 7/17/96

Area Manager, Barstow Resource Area — DATE 7-17-96

Area Manager, Needles Resource Area — DATE 7-17-96

Area Manager, Palm Springs/South-Coast Resource Area — DATE 7-17-96

Area Manager, El Centro Resource Area — DATE 7-17-96