

A Community-Based Approach to Addressing Wildfire

Gerry Gray, Vice President, Policy, AMERICAN FORESTS
(202) 955-4500 x217; ggray@amfor.org

Greg Aplet, Forest Ecologist, The Wilderness Society
(401) 273-6507; greg_aplet@twc.org

Lynn Jungwirth, Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress
(530) 628-4206; lynnj@tcoe.trinity.k12.ca.us

WASHINGTON (May 29, 2001) – More than 33,000 fires have already burned 703,000 acres of forest lands this year. A new approach is emerging on the national scene to address this danger: community-based forestry.

The National Fire Plan developed after last year's wildfire season is very much in step with key elements of community forestry, including its provisions for community fire planning, job opportunities for local and microbusiness enterprises, long-term public investment to restore forests in ways that benefit communities, and monitoring activities on federal land.

Congress allocated nearly \$2 billion in emergency wildfire funds in 2001 appropriations bill--\$240 million for hazardous fuels reduction work in the urban/wildland interface--with new authorities and significant funding for community capacity-building activities.

Why provide opportunity and funding for communities to engage in fire planning, rather than follow the traditional approach of marshalling an army of fire fighters and equipment to extinguish fires? Last summer's dramatic and costly fire season showed how serious a problem wildfire is for many Western communities. Almost 7 million acres burned and 852 structures were destroyed.

Communities from Hayfork, California, and Swan Valley, Montana, to those in Cibola County, New Mexico, have the incentive and knowledge required to develop strategies that integrate wildfire issues with the broader goals of ecosystem restoration and social and economic development in rural communities. Many members of these communities have spent their lives working in or near the forest, often in jobs related to timber-oriented forest management.

As traditional forest management changes to ecosystem-based management, foresighted communities are developing innovative approaches to restoring healthy forest ecosystems and sustaining viable communities. These approaches combine new strategies on the land, such as prescribed fires and different thinning regimens, with efforts to provide new skills, job opportunities, and small-scale economic activities in rural communities. We can learn from these innovative community-based approaches.

A new approach is needed because many of our forest lands are fires waiting to happen. A decades-old policy of wildfire suppression left much national forest land with unnaturally dense stands of trees, "ladder fuels" that carry fires into tree crowns, and years of accumulated underbrush. Dense forests, ladder fuels, and heavy underbrush often lead to intense crown fires, which burn hotter and cause damage rather than benefit the forest as do lighter, quick moving, ground fires.

The General Accounting Office reported in 1999 that at least 39 million acres in our national forests may face intense wildfire due to fuel buildup. Many scientists agree that to address the risk of wildfire we need to reduce the density of trees and underbrush. This preventative action is most needed and accepted in the "urban-wildland interface," areas adjacent to communities where human lives and property are most at risk. It is up to the new Congress,

Administration, and natural resource agencies to find the mechanisms and money to reduce this dangerous fuel buildup in the nation's public and private forests.

National and regional organizations can work with communities to build on and strengthen the practical skills and knowledge of local individuals and businesses. Groups including AMERICAN FORESTS (americanforests.org), the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, the National Network of Forest Practitioners, the Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, and The Wilderness Society are working together and with communities to build their capacity to address the risk of destructive wildfire.

As work is done to reduce fuels, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and develop economies based on restoration activities, mistakes will likely be made, as they were in the past. A "civic science" will be needed as scientists and citizens learn together not only through expert-driven research but also through on-the-ground action and monitoring.

A community-based approach to wildfire management means involving communities through collaborative processes, investing in natural resources and nearby communities, using both scientific expertise and on-the-ground knowledge, and developing a system of monitoring and accountability as called for by Congress in asking for a ten year strategy.

We must focus on risk reduction rather than fire suppression and monitor and learn from innovative solutions to natural resource management and community development challenges.

###

AMERICAN FORESTS, founded in 1875, is the oldest national nonprofit citizen conservation organization. Its three Centers—Global ReLeaf, Urban Forestry, and Forest Policy – mobilize people around the world to improve the environment by planting and caring for trees. AMERICAN FORESTS publishes *American Forests* magazine quarterly. For more information, check AMERICAN FORESTS' website at www.americanforests.org.

The Communities Committee of the Seventh American Forest Congress, founded in 1996, is a diverse group of approximately 600 people engaged in community forestry. The purpose of the Communities Committee is to focus attention on the interdependence of America's forests and the vitality of rural and urban communities and to promote programs and activities that meet the Committee's mission. For more information, check the Communities Committee website at <http://www.communitiescommittee.org/>.

The Wilderness Society works to protect America's wilderness and to develop a nationwide network of wild lands through public education, scientific analysis, and advocacy. Their goal is to ensure that future generations will enjoy the clean air and water, wildlife, beauty and opportunities for recreation and renewal that pristine forests, rivers, deserts and mountains provide. For more information, check the Wilderness Society's website at <http://www.wilderness.org/>.

This piece has been submitted for publication as an op-ed in national and local newspapers.