

history, burned through 462,614 acres, including 20 nesting areas for the threatened Mexican spotted owl. Unless fuel loads can be reduced on the thousands of acres classified at high risk of catastrophic wildfires, more adverse effects like those of the 2002 fire season are certain to occur.

The long-term strategy for the NFP is to correct problems associated with the disruption of natural fire cycles as a result of fire suppression policy or fire-prone non-native invasive species and minimize risks to public safety and private property due to the increase in amount and complexity of the urban/wildland interface. The NFP calls for a substantial increase in the number of acres treated annually to reduce unnaturally high fuel levels, which will decrease the risks to communities and to the environment caused by unplanned and unwanted wildland fire. These types of preventative actions will help ensure public safety and fulfill the goals of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative.

The FS, BIA, BLM, and NPS, as Federal land management agencies, play an important role in implementing actions under the NFP that will reduce the potential risks of catastrophic wildland fire. The FWS also develops and carries out actions in support of the NFP on National Wildlife Refuges or National Fish Hatcheries. These five agencies constitute the Action Agencies who may use the counterpart regulations proposed herein. The types of projects being conducted by these agencies under the NFP include prescribed fire (including naturally occurring wildland fires managed to benefit resources), mechanical fuels treatments (thinning and removal of fuels to prescribed objectives), emergency stabilization, burned area rehabilitation, road maintenance and operation activities, ecosystem restoration, and culvert replacement actions. Prompt implementation of these types of actions will substantially improve the condition of the Nation's forests and rangelands and substantially diminish potential losses of human lives and property caused by wildland fires. The Service and the Action Agencies are proposing these counterpart regulations to accelerate the rate at which these type of activities can be implemented such that the likelihood of catastrophic wildland fires is reduced.

#### **Federal Fuels Treatment Activities**

Each of the Action Agencies has substantial experience in planning and implementing projects that further the goals of reducing risks associated with wildland fires, while improving the

condition of our public lands and wildlife habitat. The FS works collaboratively with its partners to design and implement projects to meet a variety of land and resource management objectives, including projects to improve habitat for wildlife and fish species. Through several hundred rehabilitation, restoration and hazardous fuels reduction projects under the NFP, the FS treats over 2 million acres each year to benefit natural resources, people, and communities. All of these projects have long-term multiple resource benefits, and several have short-term wildlife benefits as well. On the Winema and Fremont National Forests in Oregon, a thousand acres of forest were thinned and underburned to protect stands and large trees from wildfire, and to increase the longevity of those trees used by bald eagles for nesting and roosting. On the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico, after habitat loss due to the Cerro Grande Fire, ground cover in the form of large fallen woody material has been restored to benefit the Jemez Mountain salamander. Habitat that had been damaged by post-wildland fire debris flows has been restored to reduce erosion and benefit Yellowstone cutthroat trout on the Custer National Forest in Montana. On the Jefferson National Forest in Virginia, prescribed fire is used every 3 years on Mt. Rogers to maintain the grassy bald area in a grass-forb stage and prevent woody vegetation from becoming established that would out compete rare plant species. Similarly, on the National Forests in Mississippi, prescribed burning reduces woody vegetation and fuels, encourages fire-dependent perennials, and restores and expands remnants of native prairie.

The BIA has planned many beneficial projects under the NFP that are designed to reduce wildland fire risk on Indian lands and to increase public safety around tribal and non-tribal communities. For example, one project will utilize both mechanical treatments and prescribed fire in lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce forests to reduce fuel loadings and protect residents and residences around the Blackfeet Indian Reservation communities of East Glacier, Little Badger, Babb, St. Mary, Heart Butte, and Kiowa, in northwestern Montana. A second project would also utilize mechanical treatments and prescribed fire to reduce fuel loadings in Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and grass fuel types that pose a high level of risk to the residents around the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation communities of Box Elder Village, Box Elder Creek, Rocky

Boy Townsite, Duck Creek, and Parker Canyon, in Central Montana. A third project would reduce fuels in about 1,300 acres of pine, juniper, oak, and grasses, by combining prescribed fire with mechanical fuels treatment techniques on Zuni Tribal forest and woodland resources in New Mexico. This project would create fuel breaks in large contiguous fuels that are at high risk for catastrophic wildfires. Finally, a fourth project will stabilize and rehabilitate 276,000 acres of White Mountain Apache Tribal lands severely damaged in the Rodeo-Chediski Fire. This project will reduce the potential threats to human life and property in surrounding communities, along with threats to cultural resources, water quantity and quality, and soil productivity.

Across the Nation, NPS is implementing numerous projects to support the goals of the NFP. Park superintendents use prescribed fire (including wildland fire), mechanical fuels treatments, and invasive species control to restore or maintain natural ecosystems, to mitigate the effects of past fire suppression policies, and to protect communities from catastrophic wildfires. NPS fire management and restoration efforts generally focus on restoring ecosystem processes rather than on the management of specific species. However, these projects provide important long-term habitat benefits to a variety of threatened or endangered species. For example, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is completing a 1,034-acre yellow pine restoration burn, the largest prescribed burn in the Park's history. The central purpose of the Park's use of fire is to replicate as nearly as possible the role that naturally occurring fires played in shaping and maintaining the Park's biologically diverse ecosystems, while also minimizing the risk of future wildfires. At Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, the use of prescribed fire is intended to restore and maintain grassland/prairie habitats in a healthy condition. The operation was an interagency effort between the FS and the NPS. Similarly, Gulf Islands National Seashore has conducted prescribed burns for habitat restoration and to reduce hazardous fuels. These burns both restore key vegetative communities and provide habitat for relocated gopher tortoises. Other projects have improved habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers at Big Thicket National Preserve and bald eagles at Lavabeds National Monument. All of these fuels treatment projects will