

Healthy Forest Initiative, directing the Department of Agriculture and the Interior and the Council on Environmental Quality to improve regulatory processes to ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest health.

In response to this direction, the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior proposed two new categorical exclusions on December 16, 2002 (67 FR 77038). The first, addressing hazardous fuels reduction activities, is intended to better protect lives, communities, and ecosystems from the risk of high-intensity wildland fire. The second, addressing rehabilitation activities, is intended to better restore natural resources and infrastructure after a fire. The supplementary information section of the notice published in December contains comprehensive background information on the need, development, and rationale for these categorical exclusions. The specific language for the proposed categories of actions are set out for comment in the notice as follows:

- Hazardous fuels reduction activities (prescribed fire, and mechanical or biological methods such as crushing, piling, thinning, pruning, cutting, chipping, mulching, grazing and mowing) when the activity has been identified consistent with the framework described in "A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan." Such activities:

- Shall be conducted consistent with agency and Departmental procedures and land and resources management plans; and

- Shall not be conducted in wilderness areas or impair the suitability of wilderness study areas for preservation as wilderness; and

- Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure.

- Activities (such as reseeding or planting, fence construction, culvert repair, installation of erosion control devices, and repair of roads and trails) necessary for the rehabilitation of habitat, watersheds, historical, archeological, and cultural sites and infrastructure impacted by wildfire and/or wildfire suppression. Such activities:

- Shall be conducted consistent with agency and Departmental procedures and land and resource management plans; and

- Shall not include the use of herbicides or pesticides or the construction of new permanent roads or other new permanent infrastructure.

Comments on the Proposal

Almost 39,000 responses in the form of letters, postcards, faxes, and e-mail messages were received during the comment period. These comments came from private citizens, elected officials, and groups and individuals representing businesses, private organizations, and Federal agencies. Responses consisted of nearly 1,900 individual letters and over 37,000 form letters.

Public comment on the proposal addressed a wide range of topics, many of which were directed generally at the President's Healthy Forest Initiative and hazardous fuels reduction. Many people supported the proposal or favored further expansion, while many others opposed the proposal or recommended further restrictions.

Comment: Some respondents voiced general agreement with the proposal. Some indicated that they think current analysis and documentation requirements are too burdensome and that the proposal would provide for more efficient management. Others believed that the proposal had appropriate limitations on the use of the categorical exclusions and that the agencies had done sufficient analysis to include that the categories of hazardous fuels reduction activities and fire rehabilitation activities do not individually or cumulatively have significant effects. Still others agreed that the collaboration requirements ensure that local affected communities will be involved.

Response: These comments were in support of the proposal and need no specific response. A summary of the remainder of public comments and the agencies' responses follows:

Comment: Some respondents stated that the proposal is not needed inasmuch as current laws and policies allow sufficient action to be taken to lower the forest fire risk in urban-wildland interface areas. They stated that agency policies already provide sufficient authority of using categorical exclusions.

Response: The Forest Service and the land management agencies within the Department of the Interior have various categorical exclusions for fire management in their NEPA procedures. Consequently, there are inconsistencies among agencies. Some agencies have the ability to categorically exclude some or all hazardous fuels reduction activities and some of or all fire rehabilitative activities while others cannot. For

example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has utilized similar categories for fire management activities since 1997. In contrast, before the issuance of the categories set out in this notice, a jointly proposed Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) hazardous fuels reduction activity using prescribed fire would have required BLM to prepare an environmental assessment, while the Forest Service may have categorically excluded such an action. These final categories provide a tool for more efficient planning of hazardous fuels reduction and fire rehabilitation activities. Having the same categories available to all of these land management agencies will facilitate inter-agency coordination and allow for more efficient planning and more timely decisions across agency jurisdictions. It will also provide greater consistency of practice. The addition of these categories, however, does not represent a substantial change for some agencies nor does it replace or prevent the use of existing categories with similar purposes. See "Comparison of USDA Forest Service and Department of the Interior Agency Categorical Exclusions" at <http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/hfi>.

Comment: Some respondents stated that the proposal inappropriately adopts a nationwide approach over a site-specific approach and that certain geographical regions or areas with specific ecological characteristics should not be included in the category. They suggested that fire does not play a significant role in some areas due to high precipitation and humidity. Suggestions included taking the Southern Appalachian forests, national monuments, Eastern forests, forests in the Pacific Northwest, old growth, and alpine forests out of these categories of actions.

Response: Data on hazardous fuels reduction and fire rehabilitation activities was collected from field units within the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service, across the United States. Based on a review of this data, it is the professional judgment of the Departments that the categories of actions identified in the hazardous fuels reduction and fire rehabilitation categorical exclusions do not individually or cumulatively have significant effects on the human environment. The data represents a broad spectrum of hazardous fuels reduction activities across vegetation types, geographic regions, and agency jurisdictions. Indeed, it is this broad representation of activities that leads the