

MAINTAIN AND RESTORE FOREST AND RANGELAND HABITATS IN THE WEST THROUGH PROACTIVE PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT

Forest and rangeland health is a great and growing concern. Despite progress in its restoration, much rangeland (especially old-age shrubland) remains at risk of uncharacteristic wildfire and deteriorating ecological condition. Combined use of forage by livestock and wildlife, coupled with decreased use of herbicides and increased risk of large and intense shrubland wildfire, impede range improvement. Expansion of annual exotic

grasses such as cheat grass, and weeds such as spotted knapweed on both summer and winter ranges is a particularly great challenge. Unwise growth and development such as human sprawl and some oil and gas development projects that do not properly consider wildlife habitat, also encroach on rangeland habitat.

RECOMMENDATION

The Administration should support a new or updated (2001) management strategy to restore the millions of acres of forest identified by the USFS as currently at risk. In addition, a companion strategy addressing fire-adapted shrub/grassland ecosystems at risk should be prepared. Agency funding recommendations should be based on the new strategies and a high priority should be placed on their preparation and implementation.

Forest health is vital to all values associated with forests, especially wildlife. Control of wildfire in the West has resulted in many aging and stagnated forests that are becoming more susceptible to large, uncharacteristic wildfire, insects, and diseases. During the summer of 2000, nearly 6.7 million acres burned, one of the worst fire seasons in 50 years. Timber mortality has increased substantially in all regions of the country, on all ownerships for both hardwoods and softwoods. The current U.S. Forest Service (USFS) strategy to deal with forest fire risks is based mostly on protecting homes in the urban/forest interface. Risks beyond that interface affecting wildlife and other watershed values are not addressed.

A NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM EXAMPLE

On the roughly 100 million National Forest System acres with ponderosa pine, dry Douglas fir and mixed conifers that historically had low or mixed severity fire, a recent USFS assessment found that more than 77% is now at risk of moderately or significantly altered disturbances including fire, insects, and diseases. Likely adverse effects include potentially changed environments *never before measured* including increased fire sizes, intensities, and severities, increased smoke (CO₂) production and stream sedimentation, significant changes in landscape composition and biological diversity, reduced stream flows, and generally reduced resilience to disturbances.

IMPLICATIONS

Federal public lands contain much of America's wildlife. For example, the 192 million acres of national forests and grasslands provide habitat for 80% of the elk, bighorn sheep, and mountain goats in the lower 48 states. Deteriorating forest and rangeland habitat, as described above, puts populations of these and other species at risk. ■