

MANAGING WILDFIRES IN COLUMBINE HONDO

The Wilderness Act is extremely permissive when it comes to controlling wildfire and allows agencies to take *any* such measure “as may be necessary in the control of fire, insects, and diseases.”¹ The Act allows great flexibility to suppress wildfires and reduce the buildup of hazardous fuels within wilderness areas. This would be the case if the Columbine Hondo Wilderness Study Area was designated Wilderness.

FIRE SUPPRESSION IS COMMONPLACE IN WILDERNESS AREAS

Over 30 years ago, the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs eliminated any lingering uncertainty over the Wilderness Act’s effect on fire suppression in a report accompanying the Endangered American Wilderness Act:

Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act permits any measures necessary to control fire, insect outbreaks, and disease in wilderness areas. This includes the use of mechanized equipment, the building of fire roads, fire towers, fire breaks or fire pre-suppression facilities where necessary and other techniques for fire control. In short, anything necessary for the protection of public health or safety is clearly permissible.²



Fire suppression and prescribed fire are regularly practiced in wilderness areas.

The expansiveness of this language means that managing agencies have significant flexibility to use whatever approaches they view as necessary—including fire roads, fire breaks, backfires, or aerial suppression—to suppress wildfires. Agencies regularly use these tactics to fight fires in wilderness.³ In short, any fire suppression activities that are allowed outside of wilderness are allowed within wilderness as well.

HAZARDOUS FUELS MAY BE REDUCED IN WILDERNESS AREAS

Pre-suppression management activities, which includes reducing the buildup of hazardous fuels, are also regularly practiced in wilderness. In a 1978 report accompanying the Endangered American Wilderness Act, the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs clarified that:

...all necessary fire pre-suppression and suppression measures (including fire roads) are clearly permissible in wilderness areas under section 4(a), (b), (c), and (d) of the Wilderness Act.⁴

¹ 16 U.S.C. 1133(d)(1).

² H. Rep. 95-540, accompanying the Endangered American Wilderness Act, PL 95-237. (emphasis added).

³ In California, for example, federal agencies have utilized bulldozers, aerial retardant, and fuel breaks within wilderness areas when necessary to suppress wildfires on at least ten occasions since 1997. See Henson, R., *A Primer on Fire Management in California Wilderness*, undated.

⁴ H. Rep. 95-540 (emphasis added). Similar language is found in Senate Report, 95-490.

The Committee emphasized this again in 1984, stating that:

[T]he Wilderness Act permits the Forest Service to utilize measures necessary to control wildfire, or the threat of wildfire, in wilderness areas...⁵

Consistent with this guidance, Forest Service regulations authorize the use of prescribed fire within wilderness.⁶

WILDERNESS DESIGNATION HAS LIMITED EFFECT ON FIRE MANAGEMENT

The Forest Service currently suppresses all wildfire, whether in wilderness or not, unless certain conditions are met.⁷ Human-caused fires are always suppressed, regardless of location.⁸

As described above, agencies have great flexibility in fire suppression tactics in wilderness. Within Forest Service wilderness, preference is given to suppression methods that cause the least alteration to wilderness values.⁹ Reducing the risks and consequences of wildfire in wilderness remains the top priority.¹⁰



Wildfire burning through Georgia's Okefenokee Wilderness.

⁵ H. Rep. 98-40 (emphasis added)

⁶ FSM 2324.22.

⁷ See FSM 5130 and 5131.

⁸ FSM 5130.3.

⁹ See FSM 2324.23. This means, for example, locating helipads, fire camps, and temporary facilities outside the wilderness, where feasible.

¹⁰ FSM 2324.21.