



File Code: 2670
Route To: File

Date: 09-06-2020

Subject: Regional Order No. 20-06

From: Randy Moore
Regional Forester
Pacific Southwest Region 5

California is experiencing an unprecedented and dire fire season. There are 18 National Forests in California, totaling approximately 20 million acres. Currently, 13 of 18 National Forests in the Pacific Southwest Region in California large fires. Nearly all fires are now large, “complex” fires (a series of fires in close proximity to one another that have burned into a single large unit). In a typical fire season California will see some 300,000 acres burn. This year, more than 1.8 million acres have already burned statewide.

Extreme weather conditions have made this situation significantly worse this year. Record high temperatures, unprecedented dry lightning events, and multiple heatwaves across the state have made conditions extremely dry and susceptible to fire ignition. Temperatures have reached over 100 degrees for most of the state several weeks running, even in areas along the coast that are typically cooler. In addition to the heat and high temperatures, significant wind events have occurred fueling blazes out of control. This week major wind events are forecast for northern and southern California. In northern California the prediction is for a 99-year historic wind event beginning Monday evening. In southern California, the early arrival of strong Santa Ana winds is predicted. The combination of record heat and wind are recipe for significant fire danger and potential disaster.

Nationally, and within California, firefighting resources are operating at maximum capacity and there are significant shortages of resources. Our firefighting organization has been in Preparedness Level 5 (PL5), the highest level of fire response preparedness, for several weeks. Nationally there are no Type 1 Incident Management Teams available and only 2 Type 2 teams available. All fire engines and major firefighting equipment are already assigned to existing fires or positioned to prevent new fire starts from escaping initial attack. This scarcity of resources has caused the agency to seek assistance from the US Military as well as other countries including Canada, Mexico, and Australia. This situation means that should additional fires break, the agency may not be able to respond in a timely manner, further risking life and property.

National Forests in California have seen record numbers of visitors this summer. Reports indicate that use levels normally associated with peak holidays such as Memorial Day and the 4th of July are being seen every day throughout the summer. This has held true this Labor Day weekend as well. Campgrounds and dispersed use areas are reported as full to capacity and overflowing. Parking lots spill over into roadways. Conflicts between use groups are up, including criminal activity. And trash and human waste are collecting faster than staffs are able to clear and clean facilities. These visitor use levels and related management issues further exacerbate a challenging fire situation creating a heightened level of risk.



In southern California and the southern Sierra Nevada mountain foothills the situation is particularly dire. Climates are typically drier in these parts of the state. And years of drought and major tree mortality in the Sierra foothill areas has created fuel types and conditions particularly suited to fire ignition. When we consider this in relation to the high levels of public use and recreation that occurs in these areas, there is a recipe for potential disaster. There are 40 million people in close proximity to the forests in southern California and use is high and difficult to manage. For example, on the San Bernardino and Angeles National Forests there are major roads leading up steep canyons access remote communities and forest areas. On most days forest recreation was so crowded that parked cars along roadsides blocked traffic. In more than one such instance emergency vehicles were prevented from access those in need because of the crowds. And finally, earlier this week the Creek Fire on the Sierra National Forest grew exponentially one afternoon due to high winds encircling a popular boat launch and lake area. As a result, 150 people were entrapped and had to be rescue evacuated by helicopters from the Army National Guard.

This Regional Order will provide for the safety of forest visitors by further mitigating wildfire ignition potential during these extreme fire conditions. It will cover the following Southern California National Forests: Cleveland NF, Angeles NF, San Bernardino NF, Los Padres NF, Sequoia NF, Sierra NF, Stanislaus NF and Inyo NF. This order will be in effect from September 7, 2020, through September 14, 2020.

This Regional Order includes an exemption for persons with a Forest Permit for Use of Roads, Trails, or Areas Restricted by Regulation or Order (Form FS-7700-48). Authorization under this exemption will only be provided if I or my delegate determine that the risk to personal health and safety is reasonable considering the circumstances of the request. We may also require appropriate personal protective equipment and other necessary safety measures. I hereby delegate the authority to sign Form FS-7700-48 granting an exemption to this Regional Order to all Forest Supervisors in the Pacific Southwest Region.

I have concluded that this decision may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or Environmental Assessment (EA) under the National Environmental Policy Act. This action falls within the category identified in 36 CFR 220.6(d) (1) – prohibitions to provide short-term resource protection or to protect public health and safety – and does not require documentation in a decision memo, decision notice, or record of decision. I have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances associated with this temporary closure. Implementation of the decision may begin immediately.