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## BRANCHING OUT

# The New US Wildland Fire Service: Improvement or Impediment?

*Tom Nichols*



Meadow Fire in Yosemite National Park, September 7, 2014.  
COWANDROOSTER/Flickr

**O**n June 12, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14308, “Empowering Commonsense Wildfire Prevention and Response,” directing the secretaries of interior and agriculture to consolidate their wildland fire programs. On January 12, 2026, the secretary of the interior signed Secretarial Order 3448 to consolidate the fire staffs of the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) into a new agency, the US Wildland Fire Service.

On May 17, 2026, the fire organizations of these four bureaus shifted into the Wildland Fire Service. The US Forest Service is not taking part in the Wildland Fire Service at this time, as the agency is evaluating the proposed unification, which would require an act of Congress to transfer the fire management portion of the Forest Service into the Department of the Interior (DOI).

This action by the president will have significant effects on all four agencies but may affect NPS most of all. The purpose of this editorial is to provide information on the creation, purpose, and function of the Wildland Fire Service, and to express my thoughts on how NPS may be affected.<sup>1</sup> The other three bureaus will likely be similarly affected.

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**Tom Nichols** retired from the National Park Service as chief of fire and aviation management.

As background, I worked for 37 years in NPS, managing fire management programs at the park, regional, and national levels, working with local, state, and federal cooperators, as well as with DOI. My education is as a fire ecologist, and I also worked in both natural resource management and in visitor and resource protection.

Perhaps no other federal agency's mission is intertwined with fire as much as that of NPS. Like local, state, and federal agencies, it has suppressed wildfires that threatened public safety, developments, and natural and cultural resources, going back to the period when the US Army administered the early national parks.

But there was also an appreciation going back over a hundred years that the presence of fire under certain conditions was not always a risk to natural resources but could be a benefit, as shown by the well-documented use of fire by Native Americans and tree ring research demonstrating the periodic occurrence of fire going back thousands of years. This benefit was especially well known in the southeastern United States, which has a long history of using fire for a variety of purposes. Indeed, on April 21, 1958,

Everglades National Park ignited the first prescribed fire in the National Park System.

Coming from the Southeast around this time was Dr. Harold Biswell, who taught at the University of California, Berkeley for many years. Transferring his knowledge of the use of fire in the Southeast to western coniferous forests, Biswell conducted prescribed fires in Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon National Parks, including in giant sequoia groves.

The 1963 Leopold Report is well known for influencing NPS to consider and manage the dynamic nature of its ecosystems. The passage in the report recommending the use of prescribed fire to restore and maintain ecosystems more akin to "primeval" conditions was directly due to the close relationship between Starker Leopold and Harold Biswell.

Students of Biswell and Leopold included Drs. Bruce Kilgore, Jan van Wagtendonk, and James Agee. Kilgore's research on fire effects in giant sequoia groves, along with Dr. Richard Hartesveldt and his team from San Jose State University, began a program

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**The Geronimo Interagency Hotshot Crew, Department of the Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), on assignment at the Big Windy Complex Wildfire in 2013.** LANCE CHEUNG/USDA





A US Fish and Wildlife Service firefighter lights a prescribed burn on prairie near a stream. JUSTIN HUGHES/USFWS

of prescribed burning which spread to many National Park System units.

Kilgore also proposed, and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks established, the first area in the country in which lightning fires would be allowed to burn at higher elevations. This program unfortunately acquired the name “let burn,” which was never an official name nor an accurate description of how such fires were managed. Like the prescribed fire program, allowing lightning-caused fire to spread, especially in remote or high-elevation areas, was also a strategy implemented by other national park units.

Critically, the use of fire in these two programs supports the NPS 1916 Organic Act and its direction to manage national park resources in a manner that leaves them unimpaired for future generations.

Acknowledging that climate change and a host of other issues complicate the definition of “unimpaired,” nevertheless attempts to exclude fire from the ecosystems of national park units that have evolved in its presence for millennia creates an ecosystem with no natural precedent, undermining the intent of the Organic Act.

Additionally, the 1964 Wilderness Act, and its direction to manage wilderness areas as “untrammeled by man,” also argues against the suppression of all lightning fire in wilderness. To do so belittles the intent of the act and creates an artificial ecosystem with no precedent in nature.

As a specific example of the ramifications of fire exclusion, the giant sequoia research emphasized two points: first, that fire was a critical factor in the

germination and life cycle of the sequoia. Second, that suppression of fire not only interfered with its life cycle but also allowed fuel to accumulate beyond historic levels and cause wildfires with an intensity far beyond the historic range, potentially devastating the groves.

Almost 60 years after this finding, the 2021 KNP wildfire complex in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks graphically illustrated this risk from fuel accumulation, and the benefits of prescribed fire in mitigating this risk. Groves that had been treated with prescribed fire to reduce hazard fuels, such as Giant Forest, were relatively unharmed by the wildfire. Areas that had not been treated, such as the lower portions of Redwood Mountain, were incinerated, killing thousands of mature giant sequoias, trees that had survived countless fires for thousands of years, but not this one.

I conclude this review of NPS fire history by restating that the relationship between the mission, purpose, and policies of NPS is intimately entwined with the presence or absence of fire. And while wildfire can be forestalled, it cannot be avoided perpetually, as demonstrated by the Woolsey wildfire, which burned through most of Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (NRA), and the Carr wildfire doing the same in Whiskeytown NRA, both in 2018.

The creation of the Wildland Fire Service was based on an assertion that wildfire costs, damage, and acres have continued to increase, which is true. Indeed, the western states, and many national park units, have experienced their largest wildfires on record since 2000. This increase in wildfire activity has continued despite a consistent 95%–98% initial attack (IA) success rate, in which wildfires are almost always suppressed quickly.

An Olympic National Park firefighter smothering embers with a “flapper.” MEGAN NAGEL/USFWS





**A National Park Service firefighter wets down an oak tree to protect it from fire.** MEGAN NAGEL/USFWS

The executive and secretarial orders are based on the assumption that creation of the Wildland Fire Service and elimination of agency fire programs will “streamline decision making, improve operational efficiency, and enhance the Departments’ ability to respond quickly and efficiently to wildfire threats.” I doubt that unification of bureau fire programs will attain that last 2–5% IA success rate. Wildfires that become very large tend to do so because of factors such as terrain; weather; fuel moisture, volume, and continuity; and multiple ignitions, and a response by a unified fire program, versus agency-specific fire programs, is unlikely to make much of a difference under these conditions.

I do believe unification may help administratively, such as providing a single point of contact, rather than four DOI bureaus, in working out agreements with local and state cooperators, although whether such efficiencies outweigh the four concerns I express below is unlikely. But it is important to give the Wildland Fire Service a chance to succeed. It’s composed of excellent fire staffs from NPS, BIA, BLM, and USFWS, so the expertise is there to forge an effective fire management agency.

If it’s nimble enough to manage wildfire in a safe and cost-effective manner, plan and conduct hazard reduction projects at a significant scale, and support the various land management missions for which agencies were established, it may be an improvement over agency-specific fire management programs.

But if it defaults to a suppression-dominated agency with a minuscule and ineffective hazard fuels program, and does not support the various agency land management missions and policies that involve the use of fire, then the question must be raised whether the Wildland Fire Service is an improvement over bureau-level fire programs.

Reviewing information released by the Wildland Fire Service, I can think of four areas of special concern that can guide the answers to this question.

First, the 2026 transition plan for the Wildland Fire Service has some troubling aspects for the land management agencies. For one, the unit manager, such as a superintendent, is no longer the agency administrator who makes decisions for wildland fire activities and operations on both wildfires and

prescribed fires. The unit manager is a “bureau representative,” signing documents but not approving actions on such documents.

Second, the 2026 Wildland Fire Service transition plan states that the bureaus will lead NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) and environmental compliance analysis requirements, as well as develop hazard fuels projects. Given the reduction in staff and budget recently experienced by NPS and other bureaus, who is left to do this work, especially after the fire staff with its expertise in these topics has been withdrawn from the unit staff?

Third, the bureau fire programs were embedded within their respective organizations, which supported them and, to a degree, insulated them from politics. The Wildland Fire Service reports direct to the DOI secretary. DOI itself is far more politicized than the bureaus, and it will come as no surprise if the Wildland Fire Service is also subject to political influence. It seems to me that the 2026 fire season instruction by both secretaries to suppress all wildfires as directly as possible reflects a position intended to avoid controversy and may well become the annual direction.

Fourth, decoupling fire management from land management is a concern. A very useful article by Matthew Wibbenmeyer entitled “If/Then: To Reduce Wildfire Risk, Agencies Need to Manage Both Fire Prevention and Response” (Resources.org, May 26, 2026) makes the case that separating land management from wildfire response will “hobble the missions of both land management agencies and the unified firefighting force.”

For example, there is a concern that reduction of hazard fuels near communities and infrastructure will be top priorities for Wildland Fire Service hazard fuels work, while reduction of hazard fuels in mixed-conifer forests, for example, will be so low in priority as to be insignificant, although protection of such forests are often vital to a unit’s mission. And that assumes that pursuing wildfire whack-a-mole will still leave time for Wildland Fire Service staff to plan, prepare, and execute hazard fuel reduction projects on a significant scale.

In conclusion, there are many ways to quantify the success or failure of the Wildland Fire Service. Do suppression costs and acres burned by wildfire go down? Is there an improvement in IA success? But one of the most important elements will be the 2027 and 2028 program of work developed by the new service for the hazard fuels program. How are projects developed and submitted for funding? How are they ranked? Where are they located? And, perhaps most importantly, are the projects accomplished at least as well as when they were conducted by agency-specific fire staff?

For NPS, an underinvestment in beneficial fire and hazard reduction will cause an erosion of the integrity of parks’ natural resources, and lead to devastating wildfires and economic loss to gateway communities. Similarly, BLM, USFWS, and BIA each have reasons specific to the agency for the use of fire, and failure by the Wildland Fire Service to use fire effectively in response to these reasons will damage these agencies as well.

There are three fire seasons until the 2028 elections. Since the Wildland Fire Service was formed from executive and secretarial orders, the next administration could assess and revoke them and restore agency-specific fire organizations. I plan to track and report on how the new service evolves and the degree to which it does, or does not, produce expected results, which may be useful in this assessment. *Parks Stewardship Forum* readers should be especially focused on whether the Wildland Fire Service is supporting the various agency policies, laws, missions, and resource objectives.

#### ENDNOTE

1. For more detail on the history of fire management in NPS, see Hal Rothman’s excellent work *Blazing Heritage* (2007). Also of great value is *Between Two Fires* by Steve Pyne (2015), especially contrasting the evolution of fire management programs in NPS and the Forest Service.

*The views expressed in Parks Stewardship Forum editorial columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of the University of California, Berkeley, or the George Wright Society.*