



The History of Wildland Firefighting

Wildfire is an element of nature that humans have had a relationship with for millions of years. When Europeans arrived in North America, they sought to exclude fire from the forest resources they wished to use. At the beginning of the 20th century, professional foresters responsible for managing federally protected lands were divided about whether to use wildfire for ecological benefits or to exclude it for fire protection. The debate ended when the great fires of August 1910 burned millions of acres, overran communities, and took the lives of over 90 people, including 78 firefighters trapped in the Northern Rockies mountains. The fires galvanized public, scientific, and Congressional support to keep fire out of the woods. Congress doubled the U.S. Forest Service budget in 1911 and passed legislation to institutionalize and professionalize fire suppression.

The Forest Service later codified total fire suppression in 1935's 10 AM Policy, directing firefighters to control all wildfire by 10 AM the morning after its first report. The vast amount of manpower afforded by the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps provided the human resources necessary to implement the new policy. Overall, the suppression effort proved very successful in reducing acres burned; the annual average dropped from a peak of 50 million acres in 1930 down to roughly 3 million by 1966.¹

Firefighters suppress fires by depriving them of fuel. Fire needs heat, oxygen and fuel to survive, therefore firefighters perform the laborious, dirty work of starving fires of fuel by building "firelines," a break in vegetation where the organic material is removed down to mineral soil. Firefighters on the ground today use roughly the same tools to build firelines as their predecessors used a century earlier. Chainsaws (which replaced double-bitted axes), shovels, and a combination axe and hoe called a Pulaski, are used to clear organic material.

Mechanization delivered firefighters faster and further into the backcountry. In the late 1930s, successful experiments dropping firefighters by parachute to remote fires led to the creation of the smokejumper program. Following WWII, large firefighting crews, aided by helicopters and all-terrain vehicles, began to specialize and shrink in size. Starting in the 1950s, the predecessors of today's Interagency Hotshot Crews, heli-rappel crews, and dedicated



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wildland fire engine teams came into more widespread use. After working for decades as fire lookouts and on all-female firefighting crews during WWII, women entered the professional ranks slowly but steadily during the 1960s and 70s, earning their way onto the most elite crews. Aircraft, both helicopters and fixed-wing planes, delivered firefighters and supported their suppression efforts by dropping water and chemical retardants onto fires.

The emerging sciences of forest and fire ecology questioned the exclusion of fire from forests and provided the science to support reintroducing wildfire to improve ecosystem health. Removing fire completely did not allow the natural regeneration process in forest ecosystems. In the 1970s federal agencies gave fire managers a more flexible policy of “appropriate suppression action,” which could range from fully suppressing a fire to confining a fire within a certain area under pre-determined conditions. This became known as wildland fire management (replacing fire control). Major policy changes in 1995 and 2014 further reinforced fire’s appropriate role on the land by embracing a vision of learning to live with wildfire and using it in part to restore forest to healthy, resilient landscapes.

Today tens of thousands of men and women serve on wildland firelines each year. They work to protect more than lives and property, they are integral to improving the health and resilience of America’s forests and grasslands.

ⁱ Earl W. Loveridge, “The Fire Suppression Policy of the U.S. Forest Service,” *Journal of Forestry* 42 (1944): 552; Pyne, *Fire in America*, 282–86; Stephen J. Pyne, *America’s Fires: Management on Wildlands and Forest* (Durham, NC: Forest History Society, 1997): 25.