



FIREFIGHTERS UNITED

FOR SAFETY, ETHICS & ECOLOGY

Statement by Timothy Ingalsbee, Executive Director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) on September 27, 2023

Two Essential Tasks of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's Final Report: Enabling Beneficial Fire, and Expanding and Supporting the Workforce

The Commission members should be commended for their dedicated service over the past year, grappling with complex, interconnected wicked problems, and multi-faceted solutions that are equally complex, interconnected, and involve difficult choices over tradeoffs. Out of the 148 policy recommendations that were developed by unanimous consensus by Commission members, there are two issues that stand out as absolutely essential for solving the crisis in the short-term, and sustaining our ability to live and work with fire in the long-term: 1) enabling beneficial fire; and 2) supporting and expanding the workforce.

Continued fire exclusion and systematic fire suppression is simply unsustainable from a socioeconomic and ecological standpoint. All fire-dependent species and fire-adapted ecosystems in North America need more fire, not less, to recover from past fire exclusion and prepare for future climate change and wildfires. The Commission's recommendation to enable beneficial fire through prescribed burning, Indigenous cultural burning, and wildfire managed for resource benefits will provide the right amount and kind of fuels treatments at the pace and scale needed to convert wildfire incidents from threats into opportunities.

But, the goal of enabling more beneficial fire use is interdependent with pre-fire planning and preparation by agencies and communities to resist structure ignition and fires spreading into communities. The ultimate objective is not only to reduce potential wildfire damage, but also to safely reap the rewards of beneficial fire use. The sooner we plan and prepare communities for fire--from all sources--the sooner we can restore ecosystems with fire.

Underlying all of the Report's recommendations is the essential need to support and expand the workforce who will do the work of implementing the policies that go beyond firefighting to include the full breadth of fire management. It is perversely ironic that the Commission issued its report with a call to support and expand the workforce just days before federal wildland firefighters' paychecks will be cut in half due to Congressional failure to pass annual appropriations and legislation specifically proposing permanent raises in firefighter pay.

Realistically, that workforce will be comprised mostly of young people, but federal agencies are failing to recruit and retain young workers to fill their ranks. The reason goes beyond low wages

and miserable working conditions. Young people are far more diverse, better educated in ecology, and more technologically skilled than previous generations of firefighters, and they do not want to jump on the treadmill of endless fire suppression that they know is part of the problem driving the wildfire crisis. The young generation wants to become part of the solution to the climate and wildfire crises. So in addition to significantly raising wages and improving working conditions, there needs to be a new mission in fire management that transcends conventional firefighting and surrenders the quixotic goal of excluding all fire from the land.

The Wildfire Commission's final report recommends both actionable and transformational actions to resolve the wildfire crisis. Taken holistically and comprehensively, the report essentially appeals for a socio-cultural paradigm shift in society's relationship with fire. But enabling beneficial fire, and supporting and expanding the workforce in fire management are perhaps the most challenging and essential issues for both short-term and long-term success in society's ability to safely work with and sustainably live with fire on the land.