

# USFS rethinking fire policy

By KABC-TV

SAN FRANCISCO – After coming in \$400 million over budget following last year's busy fire season, the Forest Service is altering its approach and may let more fires burn instead of attacking every one.

The move, quietly made in a letter last month by Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell, brings the agency more in line with the National Parks Service and back to what it had done until last year.

Tidwell described the change as simply an “evolution of the science and the expertise” with more emphasis on pre-fire planning and managed burns, which involve purposely setting fires to eliminate dead trees and other fuels that could help a wildfire quickly spread.

It also answers critics who said the agency wasted money and endangered firefighters by battling fires in remote areas that posed little or no danger.

The more aggressive “kill all fires” approach instituted last year was prompted by fears that fires left unchecked would quickly devour large swaths of the drought-stricken West, Tidwell said. New Mexico and Colorado reported record fire seasons in 2012, and with dry conditions remaining in much of the region 2013 could be another bad year in the West.

This approach, however, angered environmentalists, who said it was expensive and ignored fire's natural ability to rid the landscape of dangerous fuels and bolster forest ecology.

But letting fires burn also has its dangers, even in remote areas.

Last year, the Parks Service allowed a fire to burn that

started as a half-acre blaze in remote Lassen Volcanic National Park in Northern California. What became the Reading Fire eventually required firefighters and ended up charring 42 square miles of forestlands as it spread outside the park's boundaries to lands managed by the Forest Service and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

The fire damaged the region's timber industry and cost an estimated \$15 million to suppress. No structures were harmed.